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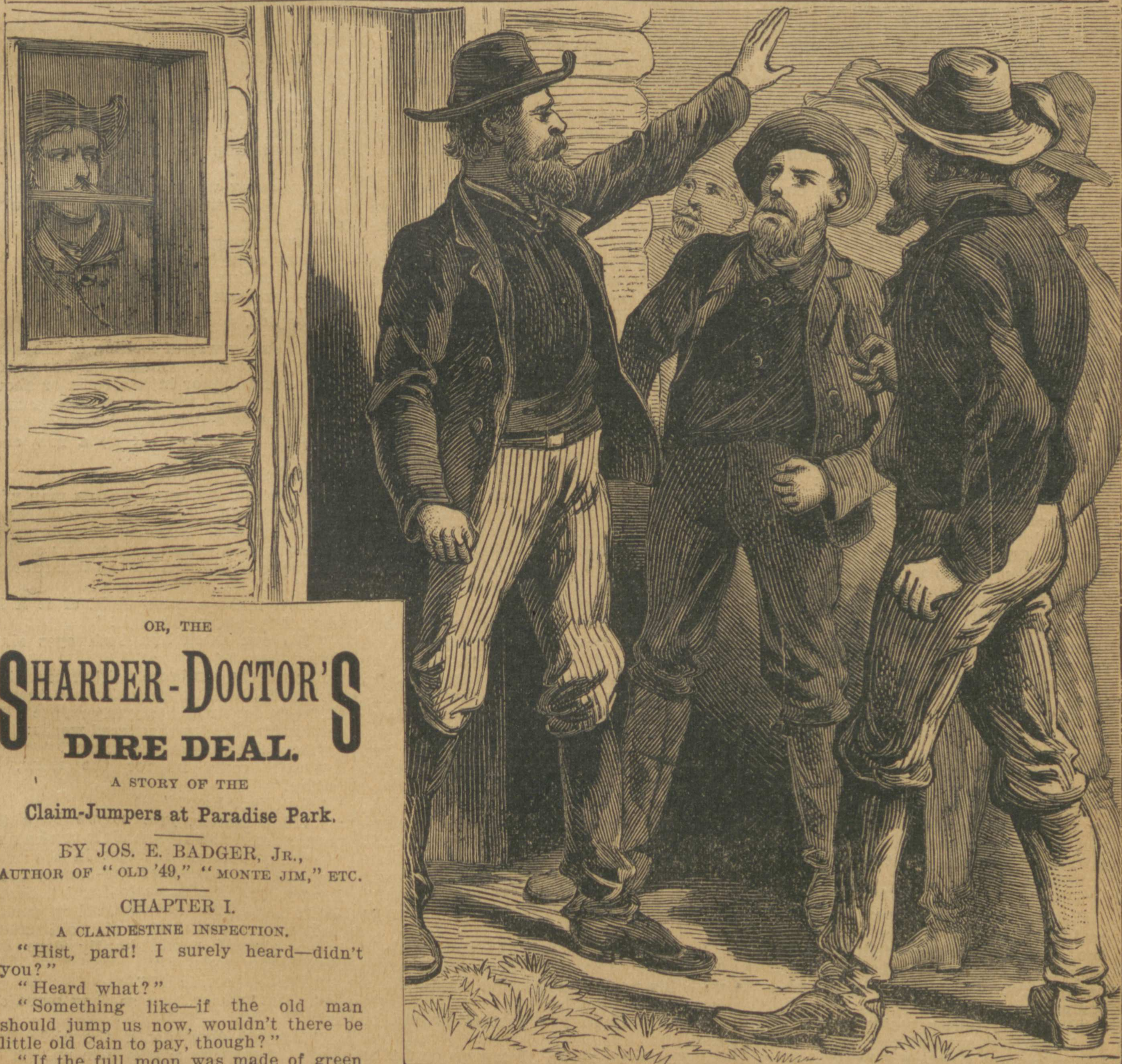
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The Double-Edged Detective;



OR, THE SHARPER-DOCTOR'S DIRE DEAL.

A STORY OF THE
Claim-Jumpers at Paradise Park.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.,
AUTHOR OF "OLD '49," "MONTE JIM," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A CLANDESTINE INSPECTION.

"Hist, pard! I surely heard—didn't you?"

"Heard what?"

"Something like—if the old man should jump us now, wouldn't there be little old Cain to pay, though?"

"If the full moon was made of green cheese, and we were a couple of rats—what's the matter with you, anyway?"

"STIDDY THAR GENTS! YOU'RE HEAP GOOD-LOOKIN', BUT YOU CAN'T COME IN, NO YE CAN'T, NOW!"

"That's all right. I heard something. What was it?"

"You tell. There's sounds enough in here to rig up a round dozen spooks or devils, far as that goes, but I heard nothing unusual. What was it like?"

"If I knew, what'd I be asking for? A sound as though somebody might be sneaking—steady, there, or I'll blow ye through!"

Viciously came the challenge, and the speaker crouched lower to that irregular floor of stone, a double click ringing out sharply as his revolver rose to a level with—what?

Guided by that action, he who seemed to be the stronger-nerved of the twain flashed his lantern that way. Naught to give alarm was disclosed, and he broke forth:

"Nothing worse than a shadow. You ought to be past balking at the likes o' that, pardner. As for old man Baker—"

"I could have sworn 'twas him, laying for a pot-shot at the pair of us. And it might be, too, just as easy. Who knows—"

"Let up, can't you? The old fool's gone, safe enough, and long before he can get back we'll have learned all we need know about this little bonanza."

"Then you really think?"

"I don't have to think when I already know it," and the holder of that dark-lantern once more swept that clear, yellow light over the face of the uneven walls, now on one side, now upon the other, at brief intervals calling the attention of his companion to spots and streaks which spoke eloquently only to the initiated eye.

"Why, man dear," with a note of poorly suppressed exultation coming into his tones the while, "there's a fortune right in sight, not counting on what lies beyond! A fortune, man! And all for—eh?"

"Reese Baker, the infernal old crack-brain!"

"Don't you think it, pardner. He may, because he is an old crack-brain, just as you term him. But, we'd be heap-sight worse if we were to leave him such a monopoly as this. Don't you reckon?"

"That's all right enough, too, old man; but what are you going to do about it? Baker 'll never sell out so a body could make anything like a fair profit from off the deal. He can't be roped into a cold-deck game, for I've tried that plenty hard, my own self. Then—what else?"

A low, half-mocking laugh came from the man who manipulated the masked light, followed by the cool query:

"What were you intending to do when you lined the shadow, yonder, my dear fellow?"

"Eh? Oh! Well, I'd have plugged him the quickest I know how, if only to keep from getting bored myself."

"Just so. Pity the shadow hadn't turned out to be substance, then. Still, what you meant, then, can very easily pan out in fact. Understand?"

"Yes, but—it'd raise a holy old row in Paradise Park!"

"You can't make a big winning if you never bet, my dear boy, and right here you can count up wealth sufficient to justify us in croaking not only one poor, crack-brained snoozer, but excuse sufficient for filling up any modest sized lot on the hillside. And so—there's no time just like the present. Why not decide in full, right here and right now?"

"About the—"

"Yes."

Placing the lantern upon a slight elevation in that far from even or smooth floor, the speaker squatted down in an easy attitude near by, in which action he was promptly imitated by his present companion.

"Well, old fellow, we've seen enough to feel fairly sure of one thing: Reese Baker has got a national bank right under his fist, if he had grit and inclination to work it properly. Right or wrong?"

"Right, for ducats. I know heap-sight

more about the papers than I do about these matters, but I'm convinced of all that, just the same."

"So far, so good. He can't, or won't, properly develop this mine, then. He'll never sell out at a reasonable figure. You can't rope him into a game, of course?"

"I've tried my level best, but it's no go."

"Good money is too mighty scarce to be let lie idle after this fashion, and so—we know what we want, and know that we want it badly. We know it can't be got hold of through fair means, so—what's the matter with playing the other card?"

"You mean—just what?"

"Solid business, and that from right now," came the answer, in lowered tones yet sounding almost painfully distinct there in the cavern-mine. "If not by square dealing, then by crooked playing. Reese Baker is past enjoying this bonanza himself, so what right has he to debar others from making better use of the find?"

"He'd kick mighty hard, all the same."

"And kicking—die!"

"Ugh! That don't sound—it's ugly talk, pardner!"

"It's business, all the same. And if you don't like the idea of making a fortune at such slight cost—well, there are other good men within reach who wouldn't throw such a glorious chance over their shoulder for a mere scruple, old fellow!"

"I'm not crawfishing. Don't you begin to think that way. Only—how can we turn the trick, safest?"

"Of course there's a certain amount of risk to be run."

"Mighty certain, I'm thinking. Old Baker isn't deuce-high in Paradise Park, just now, but let anything like—like *that* happen him, and it'd be like throwing a lighted match into an ill-kept powder magazine; a flare and a burst-up fit to shake this globe from center to circumference! You know it, old man?"

"I know this much: That right here lies wealth sufficient to make a dozen good men independently rich for life. That it is all claimed by one worthless coot who'll never do more with the bonanza than pick out a miserable living day by day, week by week, year after year, while less lucky men who are worth a million such scrubs must toil and moil from sun to sun for what he so criminally neglects."

"I know that Reese Baker has already lived too long, measured by his worth to his fellow-men. I know that 'twould be a work of mercy if somebody were to give him the grand dump, if only to leave room for a better man. And—that's precisely what's going to happen, pardner; going to happen before another week goes to waste!"

His comrade drew a long breath, but which could scarcely be termed one of pure relief. Imperfect though that light was, thanks to the partially turned mask, it was sufficient to show a troubled expression upon that not uncomely face, just then.

"That's all right, too, pardner. I'm thinking just the same way my own self. Still—"

"Still croaking?"

"Better croak now than be croaked later on! And that's just what it'll amount to in the end, unless we can turn the trick without our hands showing too plainly. You know that, man dear?"

"I know that right here's plenty to pay for all such risks."

"Mighty little good the stuff will do for a fellow after he's been pulling hemp with his neck and dancing on air for a few hours, though!"

"Bah! Have you turned coward so soon?"

"That's all right. I can go as far as you dare lead, and—"

"Then we'll call it a settled fact," declared the bolder speaker, rising to his feet and stretching his long limbs in

careless gestures. "I'm dead-set on getting full possession of this mine, though the winning lead me to—Tophet itself!"

His comrade likewise rose erect, but apparently feeling far less thoroughly content with the situation.

"I'm in the deal with you, pardner," he said, his tones sounding half-surly. "As you say, it's a stake rich enough to run long chances for the winning. Still, a man's worse than a fool to play the fool when he can do better, to my notion."

"Another Solomon!" mocked the first speaker, again giving that irritating half-sneer, half-chuckle. "Give us a fair proof of your superior wisdom, then, old man."

"You can chaff—"

"And I can act, too! If you can show how we may get old Baker out of the road without using violence, good enough! I'll doff my cap to your honor, with all the pleasure in life. But—can you?"

"Well, maybe not," came the reluctant response. "Still, I can't say I'm actually hungry for such a dose of cold hemp as the Cits will want to measure out in case any red work is done, up this way. No, sir!"

"It's catching before hanging, remember."

"What's to hinder both if we—do that, though?"

"You mean—"

"Curse it all! I mean if we—if we croak the old crack-brain."

"Would you hasten to advertise that we did the awful deed, though? I'm free to own that I'm tough, after a certain fashion, but that—that is just a weenty bit too much impudence, pardner."

"Augh! you make me tired! If we grab this mine, what's to hinder all the valley pitching on us as turning the trick?"

"Supposing we were idiots enough to leave a plain trail behind us. But who said anything about doing that?"

"How can it be helped, though?"

"Easy enough. Did you never hear of a fellow selling out his property on short notice, or even without any warning to outsiders?"

"What?"

"That's my way of looking at the situation, old fellow. Old Baker has made no close friends or intimates in or about Paradise Park. Should he take a sudden notion to sell out and leave for other diggings, who's to kick up a row over his choice?"

"Is that the way of it, then?"

"To my notion, yes. Take a man who lives so much by himself as old Reese Baker has ever since settling down in these parts and it's by no means a difficult job to shunt him off the track for all time."

"He'd make a nasty fight of it if he was all-eyes-open, though!"

"We can catch him both eyes shut, then."

For nearly a minute neither conspirator spoke, both apparently considering the ugly deed which lay in prospect; but then came the slowly uttered words:

"And after Baker—racks out?"

"We'll come in for the mine, of course."

"But, just how?"

"What matter, just so we have the proper papers and documents to show all who may feel an interest in the matter? And—give me four-and-twenty hours leeway, and I'll agree to furnish everything needed in that line, all so perfect and so complete that the old crack-brain himself would hardly dare dispute legal transfer."

"Forge them, is it?"

"What matter, just so they serve our turn?"

"Suppose they don't, though? Suppose the original papers turn up? If we fail to find them—and he's a mighty close-mouthed piece, is old Baker—and they should be brought to light by other parties; how about that?"

"Suppose you try to help instead of to hinder, for a change?" tartly spoke the other schemer with a brief show of teeth. "Can't we make sure the fellow takes none of his documents with him when levanting? And if not on his person, won't they be stowed away in his shack, or else some clue to their deposit elsewhere? And, with the mine, won't we come in for everything else?"

"Unless a better claimant should turn up."

"What are you trying to get through you, anyway? Of all the infernal croakers I ever met up with, you're about the worst!"

"That's all right if you can only make it come so," with a dogged tone. "But, all the same, I'm hardly fool enough to jump in over head and ears without seeing at least a chance to come out even. And so I'm saying it all over; what if a better claimant arises?"

"If we have the proper papers to show—"

"What good would they do as against the originals, though? Nothing better than to help knot the rope by which—I tell you, sir, it's a mighty tempting bait, looked at from your point of view, but—"

"My point is the only one, too. What sort of claimant, pray?"

"The old crack-brain's son, for instance."

"His—what?"

"Baker's son, John, I think he was called. I never saw the fellow, nor am I positive he was ever seen in these parts, but I've heard the old fellow drone on about his 'Jacky, boy,' until you couldn't rest."

"Why didn't you speak about this before, then?"

"Never thought of it, I reckon. You roped me in so mighty sudden, too, that I hardly had time for looking at both sides of the question."

His companion seemed taken seriously aback for a brief space, that uncertain light showing a face marked with a dark and forbidding frown, while thumb and forefinger pulled sharply at his pouting underlip.

He rallied quickly, however, giving his head a defiant toss, then saying in reckless tones:

"Well, the game is more than worth the candle. Let this prospect be fairly developed and 'twould pay for a dozen lives, let alone two."

"Then—if the son should happen to turn up and try to make us trouble?"

"There's a high lot on the hillside for him, as well," came the decisive answer. "Queer though, that this is the very first I've heard about any such relation. You're dead sure there's no mistake on that point, pardner?"

"I know that Baker has frequently spoken of a son, John or Jack, or Jacky. I know that he's more than once in my hearing let drop hints as to his expecting that son to 'come back home again.' Beyond that, I know nothing more than you do about the matter."

"Maybe it's nothing more than a bit of crazy maundering, after all," thoughtfully suggested the prime villain as he stooped to pick up the dark-lantern, once more opening the slide to its fullest extent and casting the fan-shaped light to right and to left, upward and downward, revealing those pick-scarred walls of stone, although one far less experienced could readily see that this subterranean opening was in goodly part the work of nature herself.

Here and there might have been seen a dull gleam as of metal, but for the greater part an untrained eye would never for an instant have suspected the truth; that right here lay hidden riches sufficient to pay ransom for a king's crown and state.

That fan of yellow light rested briefly upon a narrow break in the natural flooring of the cavern, showing dark and ominous, out from whence came a low, muffled sound as of running waters.

A low, grim laugh came from the lips of the man with the lantern as he took this brief survey, then he spoke again:

"Heap sight better than plying our professions, pardner, don't you think? Give me full swing here for a couple of months, and I'd agree to make the whole money-world ring with the fame of Paradise Park as a new gold-field which—what is it, now?"

"Better wait until we get a cinch on it, don't you reckon?"

"We've got it, right now, man! There's nothing more to be done than to put old Reese Baker out of the way, and that is—hello!"

He cut himself short as a sound came from the darkness beyond that fan of light, but ere either villain could fairly locate sound or its precise nature, more positive evidence was given them.

Sharp and distinct came the words:

"Who in time are ye, and what fetches ye in here? Talk white, or I'll blow ye through! Hands up, the couple o' ye!"

CHAPTER II.

A DEED OF DARKNESS.

With the challenge came a distinct double click, as though hammer of pistol or of rifle was being drawn back in readiness to fire, although neither of those challenged could as yet catch even a glimpse of the unlooked for intruder.

Little doubt as to the identity of the speaker, however, and knowing right well what scant mercy their clandestine actions really merited, the conspirators took swift action.

"Split and take him, pard!" cried the bolder schemer, at the same instant dropping his lantern to the floor and leaping swiftly aside and to the rear, where the darkness would help screen his person from shot.

The lantern came to no harm through that sudden action, standing upright with yellow fan spreading away to the front, casting all behind into denser shade through pure force of contrast.

As though actuated by the same springs the two rascals separated, one to right, the other taking to the left, both whipping forth their revolvers and opening fire without further word or parley.

Their aim was guided solely by intuition, so far as their first shots went; but then, only the fraction of a second after their swift recoil came a lurid explosion from the front, briefly revealing a human shape and thus giving them the needed cue.

Viciously barked their weapons, and with the sounds came another; a wild, fierce, despairing scream which was half-curse, half-prayer, such as a man naturally gives when death-stricken.

A second shot from the front, but the red glare showed an upturned muzzle as the Winchester fell from unnerved hands, and an instant later that unfortunate staggered blindly forward, coming into the lighted arena with hands tearing at his bosom where the serpent of death was already stinging fiercely.

Only a momentary glimpse of the luckless intruder was vouchsafed the slayers, but that was amply sufficient for recognition on the one side, and a savage oath broke from one of the villains.

"It's old Baker; down him—for keeps, pard!"

"Oh-h, you devils!" hoarsely panted the wounded miner, dashing one blood-stained hand across his face as though hoping thus to drive the mists from his eyes. "I never—don't murder me, for I'm not—"

Again those vicious reports, and like one hard hit, the poor old prospector flung up his hands, reeling dizzily, to fall headlong into that break in the cavern floor!

"Back, you fool!" fiercely cried one of his enemies, springing forward, heedless of the fact that now he was coming from darkness into light where recognition might well follow. "Don't you see that—back, I say! You'll fall and—fire and furies!"

If heard, that vicious warning came all too late. The unfortunate toppled over and vanished from view, only a faint, despairing cry coming back to the ears of his slayers. Only that, until—

"Into the drink, for ducats!" cried the second assassin, as a sullen splash came floating upward to their hearing from out that dark opening.

"And if we can't—quick, curse you, man!" savagely cried his comrade in crime as he snatched up the dark-lantern and sprung toward that break in the natural flooring of the cavern. "You've got the rope; hand it here, can't you? Unless we can catch the body—hasten, man!"

"You can't save him, if that's what you're playing for. I had him lined to a dead moral. And—what's biting you, anyway?"

While speaking he was fumbling awkwardly at his middle, about which a slender but strong line was wound.

"The rope—hand it over, can't you?"

"That's all right, only—what for?"

"Curse your chin-chin! Act, you fool! If we can't—steady, now, and see if you can glimpse the old crank, will you?"

With nimble fingers the speaker knotted the slender rope to the dark-lantern to suit, then bent far over the edge of rock as he lowered the light foot by foot, using eyes most eagerly the while.

A double wall of rock, too nearly perpendicular for any mortal to climb up or down without other aid than could be given by his own hands and feet.

Twenty-odd feet below their present level, a dark, sullen stream of water was flowing with a circular motion which caused it to resemble a whirlpool, rendering it no easy matter to decide just where entrance or exit might lie.

No human shape showed upon that gloomy surface, nor was aught living or dead clinging to either of those water-worn projections of rock.

Here and there the lantern was swung, the rope swaying to cast a fan of light in all directions by turn, swinging here and there the better to illuminate each separate square foot of that eddying surface.

All in vain. Reese Baker had vanished as completely as though he had never known existence!

He who was manipulating the rope and lantern gave another vicious curse as failure grew assured; but, not so his comrade. He seemed to feel relief rather than regret, judging from face and voice, when the next words crossed his lips.

"Down to Davy Jones' locker, and good riddance!"

"If I thought—could he have sunk, think?"

"Of course! Didn't we ballast him with lead until a horse could hardly have held him on top the water? And, good enough, too, I'm saying!"

"I've a good mind to try diving after his carcass, for—"

"Are you crazy, man?"

"Where does all that water go? Who knows but what it may have an opening big enough to carry the crack-brain through. I'd give a cool hundred chucks just to have my grip tight on that body, now!"

"Rather you than me, then. I don't want any of it in mine."

"But if the body should get out into the river, and be picked up by somebody? Wouldn't that play the devil with our calculations?"

"How so?"

"Well, we surely struck the fellow more than once, didn't we?"

"I should remark! I know I gave him anyway a couple of pills, either one of which ought to be sufficient to settle a heap-sight better man than ever stood in Reese Baker's shoes. And then—"

"I had him lined, as well; but, can't you see? If his body should be found, early enough to mark the different holes, wouldn't that show foul play? Only an idiot would try to explain death on the

score of suicide under such circumstances. And then—if foul play with him, how about our holding this mine?"

Again the dark lantern was swung to and fro, turned by manipulating the rope until the light covered every inch of space visible from their present location; but wholly without other result.

The body certainly was not afloat upon that sluggish whirlpool, nor was it fastened by death-grip upon either wall of the sunken river, so far as that yellow glow could determine.

"You're making a mighty heap of worry over nothing, pardner," declared the lesser villain, after a few moments spent in that vain quest. "Old Baker's past floating, safe enough. He had enough life left in him when he tumbled over to fill his lungs with water; and *you'd* ought to know what *that* means."

"That his body would sink, of course. But if the current should prove strong enough to sweep him out and down-river?"

"Bah! Don't let that flea pasture all over your range, old man," in a tone of contempt which he rarely dared use toward this comrade in crime. "Maybe you never did, but I've listened to old Reese chin-chin about his water power no end. And he always declared that it held no connection whatever with the river, out yonder."

"You are sure of that?"

"Dead sure, or I wouldn't be saying it so loud," came the confident response. "Baker said just that, and he surely ought to know. He often said that he'd one day rig up a power for—"

"Never mind that part of it; he was full of crack-brain quips and quirks, and I'm not sorry for it, now. So long as his carcass is safe from discovery—look yonder, though!"

"What is it now?"

"Nothing to shoot at, you fool," snarlingly came the words as his mate recoiled a bit and lifted revolver. "Something to wipe out, all the same, if we're going to openly claim our rights to this property."

While speaking the assassin was drawing up his dark-lantern and detaching it from the end of the rope. Tossing this coil to his mate, he took the light and passed around one end of that break in the floor, pausing again when near the point where the luckless mine-owner had stood when the first shots were fired.

Here could be seen a few scattering drops of blood, with more to the front, while an ugly smear marked where the wounded man had slipped over the edge.

"Get down to solid business, man," he surlily cried, dropping to his knees and gathering up a handful of sand by way of example. "Or, better still; go fetch the bucket of water we saw back yonder. Lively, now!"

Like one well used to obey, the lesser villain hurried off through the dark, leaving his comrade busily scrubbing away at those tell-tale spots with sand and a fragment of rock.

Returning after a brief absence with a wooden pail nearly filled with water, work was pressed with activity, 'kerchiefs being used as swabs for lack of better material, and fresh water being drawn up from the whirlpool below.

Not until the ugly stains were completely obliterated did the two conspirators cease their labors, and then 'twas to once again lower the light to scan that dark pool and damp walls for some sign of the dead.

Now, as before, the quest proved to be time wasted, and there was a dark frown upon the face of the elder villain as he finally gave over his efforts in that direction.

"I'd give a pretty penny just to know—curse the luck, anyway! Why couldn't he play half-way white, and do his croaking up here on the level? Then we could have given him decent burial and—what are you grinning about, now, confound you?"

"With prayer, and sermon, and singing of hymns—holy smoke!" came chucklingly. "Just to listen to you a body'd think—"

"Let up on that, will you? It's a tremendous stake we're playing for, man, alive, and I'd be worse than a fool if I didn't prefer being dead sure as we go along. As it is, if that body should turn up in time for the manner of his death to be settled—well, it'll make trouble."

"Which it'll never do, unless the old codger was lying just to hear the sound of his own voice," quickly cut in the other rascal.

"I trust so. Still, with necks at stake, we'd better take no wild chances. We hold the last trumps out, and can take every trick whenever the game goes on. That being the case, we can well afford to lie low for a little. Understand?"

"Wait until we see what turns up, is it?"

"Pretty much that; yes. I'll get the papers all fixed up, and in readiness. I'll make a bill of sale that old Baker himself couldn't fairly kick against should he rise up to ask what's going on. And then we'll be ready for business when—unless that son should come to the surface, just when we can best spare his presence!"

A low, significant chuckle broke from those other lips, followed by the words:

"There's room for the boy where the old man went in advance, I reckon, pardner."

"Of course. Still, a fellow doesn't care about turning butcher every day in the week, if he can help it."

"You wouldn't balk at sending son after father, though?"

"Nor a dozen such, should the necessity ever arise," came the cold assurance, in itself ample evidence of nerve such as few men can rightfully boast. "But we'll hope that isn't to be the case with us. Since he hasn't shown up for years, why should the son come to the front right now? And if he waits until we are fairly in possession—"

"He might better stop away altogether, so far as benefiting his bank account is concerned, eh?"

"You may stake your delightful existence on that, pardner!"

Slowly the light was swept over the floor until both criminals could see that no tell-tale signs were left to betray their deed of darkness, then they slowly moved away from the whirlpool brink, once again scanning those gold-tinted walls in passing.

Here and there they could detect bits of nearly pure metal, some of which were so plainly exposed that the point of a knife or blow of pick would be all that was necessary to secure the precious stuff; and, as their talk gave evidence, such had been the manner in which the recent owner, Reese Baker, had mainly done his erratic mining.

"It's a deed of justice, our shunting him to make room for his betters! He'd never develop the mine, and never do more than live from hand to mouth, playing miser over enough wealth to uphold a kingdom! So I say it again: We're benefiting mankind in general by removing him."

"And ourselves in particular, which strikes me nearer home," chucklingly supplemented his comrade in crime. "Now—put out the light, for we're mighty nigh getting there!"

"And keep a tight lock on your lips, pardner. Our present cue is to watch and wait. Later on—ready? Then out goes the glim!"

The next instant they were left in utter darkness.

CHAPTER III.

A WOMAN OF COURAGE.

"Oh, mamma! Come quick! Here's a man—a man in the wivver!"

Sharp and clear rung forth the young voice, and with the evident excitement there was blended a note of affright which caused the mother's heart to bound with unwonted vigor.

"Willie—oh, Willie!"

"Mamma—mamma, come see!"

The youngster, hardly past his first lustrum, came more distinctly into view among those thick-lying rocks which bordered the river, swinging his short arms with unusual vigor, while his fair if none too clean face just then told how strongly excited he was at some discovery made but a few moments before.

Mrs. Dingle, her own face unusually pale just then, thanks to maternal fears, hurried forward over that rough route, heedless for herself in motherly anxiety for her only child.

"What is it, Willie?" she asked, pantingly, as she came nearer the spot where the little lad now was. "You've scared me until—what is it, dear?"

"A man, down in 'e wivver! I finks he must be a—deader, mamma!"

Mrs. Dingle recoiled, briefly, that look of anxiety changing to fear as she falteringly spoke again:

"Not—not grandpa, Willie? You saw—it wasn't grandpa, dear?"

"No; gran'pa ain't old deader," with infantile scorn expressed in face as in voice. "'Is man don't look—you go see, mamma!"

The youngster turned toward the not distant stream, the sullen muttering of which was distinctly audible to their ears the while, yet he plainly shrunk from taking another view himself. And this, even more than the words he had spoken, convinced Fanny Dingle that an ugly truth lay hidden beyond those piled-up rocks and ragged boulders.

She hesitated for an instant or more, shrinking from aught ugly or gruesome after the feminine fashion; but as quickly rallying, Mrs. Dingle pressed forward, pausing only when fairly in view of the brawling little river on its way from mountain to desert.

At first she saw nothing more than the little eddies, the foam-breaks where water curled over some barely submerged point of rock, the occasional bit of drift-wood or other debris which comes from one scarcely knows whither.

Willie, half whimpering in childish dread, came closer to her side, tugging at a fold of her skirt while saying, lowly:

"A man, mamma! Is it—a real—sure 'nough deader, ma?"

Even as Willie spoke Mrs. Dingle caught sight of the object which had so startled the little lad, herself shrinking briefly back with a partially smothered exclamation.

For there, closer to that same side of the stream, and consequently overlooked at first, was "the deader," kept from drifting further down stream on the rapid current by a frail hold upon a drooping bush.

A human being, easily enough, but it took a second glance to make fairly sure of the sex; those long locks of nearly snow-white hair were tossing and floating on the current, now half-concealing the face, then leaving it exposed to view once more.

The body itself swung fitfully from side to side under action of the current, plainly showing that it was not resting on bottom, or was held near the one spot by lack of water to completely float it.

"It isn't—you said 'twas gran'pa, mamma, and it ain't!" whimpered little Willie, clinging tightly to his mother's skirts the while, yet venturing to lean far enough over those rocks for another scared peep at yonder awe-inspiring object. "I fought—I 'most knowed—is it a—old deader, ma?"

"Hush, dear!" Mrs. Dingle hastened to enjoin, barely above a whisper, while one hand sought to cover those childish lips without eyes to guide them.

She was unable to turn eyes away from that sight below, although a shiver of fear was agitating her trim-built figure and blanching her usually rosy cheeks.

Surely it was all that remained of one who *had been* alive and full of ac-

tivity but a brief while before! Surely this was—ha!

A bit of drift, showing black and snake like on the foam-dotted surface, came swiftly that way, striking one side of that exposed face, end-on, then being swept around by the current which would not long be denied.

Surely that was a stir, greater than the drifting bit of wood could cause? Surely there was—yes!

She saw those lids rise feebly, and that head turn slightly as though its owner was looking for aid, in this, his sore extremity. And—more!

"Help—save—I die!"

The unfortunate was speaking, striving with his too feeble remnant of strength to cry aloud for assistance.

Only ears of the keenest sense could have distinguished aught above the sullen roaring of those hurrying waters, but Fanny Dingle not only heard but comprehended so much.

She knew that at least a spark of vitality remained, and her blood turned from chill to sudden warmth as a cry of encouragement broke from her parting lips.

"Hold fast, please! I'll save you if—oh, pray hold fast until I can—Willie, dear!"

"I'm—I'm scared, mamma!"

"No, no, darling; you must be brave—you must help this poor man who needs—Willie, my great big man!"

"No; 'tittle boy; 'tittle baby boy, mamma!"

"No, Willie," striving to smother her own unusual emotions while drawing back a bit from the verge, kneeling and forcing the youngster to meet her earnest gaze, while she added: "You are mamma's man, you're grandpa's great big man, now, and you must act just like a man, too."

"Yes, but—that old deader is—"

"He isn't dead, Willie, and we must help him up out of the river. You must hurry back home and tell grandpa; tell him to fetch the long rope to pull a man out of the river. Tell him mamma is down here, waiting for him to come. You will? Say you will do this for mamma, Willie?"

There were tears of anxiety coming into the mother's eyes as she swiftly spoke on, and something close akin to tears likewise sounded in her voice the while. Yet, mother-like, Fanny Dingle forced a smile and kissed her boy even as she pushed him away from her rapidly throbbing heart.

Willie Dingle was fully as brave and independent as most lads of his tender age, and now he plucked up courage on being given such an important errand to perform.

"Grandpa gone 'way off, mamma," he said, hesitatingly, looking over that rocky tract the while. "How me find him when he gone off?"

"Grandpa's come back by now, Willie. Hurry home; you know the right way, Willie, dear man?"

"'Course me know; anybody know that!"

"Then hurry, Willie. Make grandpa come. Make him bring the long rope. Tell him there's a man in the river to pull out and—hurry, my dear little man! Run as fast as you can, Willie, but don't—don't fall and hurt yourself, darling!"

The little lad started off bravely enough, and not daring to waste more precious time in watching him, Fanny Dingle turned again to the rocky escarpment beyond and below which lay a fellow-being in such sore distress.

That first glance showed her no particular change in the situation.

The body still swung fitfully from side to side as the restless current tugged at it, held only by such a frail hold; a hold which promised to break away with each coming motion.

It was as though this unfortunate had been swept down stream by the current, and coming under a hanging bush near the rocky shore, had made a desperate effort to save himself.

One arm had come in contact with a leafless portion of that bush, the wrist catching in a fork, the tension being barely sufficient to cheat the tugging waters and to hold that ghastly pale face above the surface, and keep the parted lips from water.

Fanny Dingle saw all this in those brief moments, and even as she realized how slight was that hold, she made another discovery.

"It surely is—merciful Father! It is poor old Mr. Baker!"

Again those heavy lids lifted, and the sorely imperiled man seemed to be gazing directly up into that sympathizing face as he huskily gasped forth the words:

"Help! Save me for—heaven's sake!"

"I will!" cried Fanny Dingle, color coming back to her cheeks as by magic. "Courage, Mr. Baker! Hold fast until—I'll save you or—I will help you, now!"

When Willie Dingle made that strange discovery, he and his mother were doing all that lay in their power to aid in "making a living" for Grandfather Harlow Crimmins and themselves.

While the old man took rifle and passed deeper into the wooded hills lying north of their mountain home, daughter and grandson proceeded to the river, there to overhaul the "set-lines" and rebait hooks where rendered necessary.

Fanny likewise intended putting out another long "throw-line," but as yet had not done so, most fortunately as she now told herself.

Knowing that it would be impossible for her to with safety descend those rocks near where the old prospector was floating, Fanny hurried a short distance up-river, where the rocks were a trifle less precipitous, unfastening the coil of heavy cotton line which had until now been secured at her waist for easier carriage.

With a nerve and degree of activity scarcely to be looked for in a woman of her essentially feminine appearance, Mrs. Dingle contrived to lower herself over those rocks, little by little drawing closer to the edge of the river, never once losing nerve or shrinking from what might easily prove a disastrous fall in case hand or foot should play their fair mistress false.

Not until she was fairly at the water's level did Fanny Dingle dare take time for a look down-stream to make sure that frail hold on life still proved true; but her breath came with a glad gasp as she saw that gray-head still swaying there beneath the half-dead bush.

With nimble fingers she unwound that coiled line, doubling it from the center and measuring the distance with anxious eyes the while.

Was the cord long enough? Would it hold out against the unusual strain about to be put upon it? Could she reach poor Mr. Baker? And, if so, could she manage to—to—

A shiver ran through her lithe shape at that thought, and she dared not press it further. Enough that a fellow-being was in extremity, and that upon her nerve and address his last hope of life almost surely rested.

Working as swiftly as possible with a due regard to safety, Fanny Dingle doubled the cotton fishline, looping that end around a projecting rock of such shape that the cord could hardly slip away, no matter what manner of strain might be placed upon it.

If she could only be as certain about the line itself! If it would only bear the strain without breaking!

Afraid to dwell upon this dubious point, the brave little woman took a double turn of the line around her small but strong hands, the slack line resting over her shoulders out of the way, then stepped into the water.

It was cold; that she was prepared for, as a matter of course; but this cold seemed like a death-chill—ugh!

Little by little, yet moving as rapidly as she dared, knowing that any moment might see that slender fork split and re-

lease yonder dead-weight, when all her efforts would be worse than wasted, Mrs. Dingle let out the line, feeling blindly for secure footing.

The bottom, like the banks, seemed wholly composed of rocks, uncertain footing at the best, but now doubly insecure since she knew so well how important time was to yonder helpless being.

The current caught her skirts and tugged fiercely at them, trying to destroy her none too certain balance, sending shivers of womanly fear creeping over her tense limbs and strained muscles.

Once or twice her foot slipped, and only the firm hold upon that slender cord saved her from being swept away by the current, while she gasped huskily as she thought what would follow if—

"It can't break—it shall not break!" she panted, hardly conscious of the words which found utterance, so powerfully was she worked up just then. "Coming—I will save—kind heaven grant that I may save him—at last!"

As often the brave woman—looking hardly more than a girl in spite of her motherhood, just now—recovered her lost balance, little by little passing further from the rock around which her fishline was looped, bit by bit drawing nearer the shrub to which that now silent unfortunate was hanging.

Then—again her foot slipped from a rock-point, and this time she completely lost her balance, the current sweeping her lower limbs clear of the rocks, thus casting all her weight upon the frail line.

For a brief space it seemed as though it would prove true, but as Fanny struggled to find fresh footing, the line parted and she was swept away, her involuntary scream of horror rising high above the roar of river.

CHAPTER IV.

THE DOUBLE-EDGED DETECTIVE.

"Hello! Struck a kindergarten or—is it an orphan asylum broke loose, I wonder?"

John Jamison stopped short and made a half-turn, to more squarely front the way from whence came that shrill, childish wail of pain or of affright.

At first he saw nothing; then a childish figure came into his range of vision; a crying lad whose years had hardly carried him past infancy, as yet.

"Hello again!" and the bluff stranger stood on widely diverging legs, hands on hips and head cocked a bit to one side as his keen black eyes swept past and to either side of yonder mourning youngster. "A kid, safe enough, but where's doe or buck? Too youthful a kid for ranging on the loose, a body'd think, yet—where's the rest of the tribe, wonder?"

Not in sight, that was certain, and having settled so much to his own satisfaction, Jamison lifted hand to mouth, calling cheerily:

"Hello, kid! What d'ye recon's the matter with ye, anyway?"

Willie Dingle turned quickly at that hail, but shrunk perceptibly as he saw a stranger in place of the loved grandfather whom he more than half expected to behold.

One moment thus, then he turned as though to seek safety in flight.

"I'm a scarecrow even to the kids!" muttered the stranger, a frown coming into his scarred visage as he saw this action. "You'd ought to go masked, Jack Jamison, whenever you wander away from good old Gypsum. Yes, you had, now! And, blamed if I wouldn't, too, only I'd hate like sin to be yanked up for a road-agent!"

Possibly Willie Dingle might have escaped, even then, only for the tears born of an earlier fall over a sharp rock, and which now so blinded his eyes as to make another stumble and fall almost a matter of course.

At his cry of pain and fright Beautiful Jack sprung that way with a speed remarkable in a man of his solid build and wide dimensions, and before the lad

could fairly realize what had befallen, he was picked up by strong hands, held in powerful arms, soothed by a voice as pleasant as that scarred face was forbidding in its ugliness.

For to those who saw him first, John Jamison was actually ugly.

His features were irregular enough in the first place, but had been accentuated by a knife-slash or saber-stroke which had left a broad scar running from left temple to right jaw, and which had a far from agreeable habit of turning purple when anger rose within that broad breast.

A man, too, of more than ordinary height and width and thickness was Beautiful Jack, the Double-Edged Sport Detective from Gypsum; a man such as skilled judges would set down as "built from the ground up."

Face and size, then—when added to his present rough-and-ready garb of high boots, brown duck trousers, heavy flannel shirt, unbuttoned at the throat and only held together by a loosely knotted 'kerchief of scarlet silk, while at his middle showed a broad belt of webbing covered with loops for cartridges to fit the brace of "Forty-fours" which rested against each hip—all seemed more than enough to frighten a little boy like Willie Dingle clear out of his senses.

And yet, curiously enough, Willie lost his fear after a single look into those keen eyes, and he even laughed as that scarred face broadened in a quaintly ferocious smile.

"That's right, captain," genially spoke cool Jack, giving the youngster a friendly hug by way of additional assurance. "I knew you wasn't hurt nor yet frightened. Pooh! A great big little man like you? Well, now, I should snicker to snort—not!"

"I hurted me—des awful! I fallded over—fallded *all* over me! I des cried like—oh! I want my gran'pa! Mamma said me was to hurry up like— I want my gran'pa, yight off, now!"

"Why, of course you do, captain! We'll go catch your grandpap so mighty sudden he won't know what manner of cyclone has started to build birds' nests in his hair! Or—hope grandpa isn't bald, captain? And—where is your mother, major?"

"Over there," with a nod of head toward the not very distant river. "There's a man—a old deader man in 'e wivver—and mamma say me hurry gran'pa up wiv 'e big yope like—I want my gran'papa!"

Jack was keenly alert, now, his quick wits divining at least a portion of the startling truth as thus dimly revealed.

"A dead man in the river? Mamma there, eh? Which way; up or down, general? I'll play grandpa for once if you'll only give me a weenty bit of a hint—that's the river, over yonder, isn't it?"

"Course it is, but mamma said Willie must go—"

"All right, and here Willie goes; riding an elephantbuster—so! Hold fast, general, for if you fall—well, you'll break all these nasty rocks to sand with that precious old head of your own; yes you will, now, my gallant captain!"

With long and swift strides Jack was hurrying over space toward what he knew must be the river whose subdued rearing he had before noticed. As by instinct he knew that his aid was needed in that quarter, although he could only give a dim guess as to just how or by just whom.

Before he had covered one-half the necessary distance, however, he heard a clear, prolonged cry coming from some little distance further down the river, and as he stopped short, Willie eagerly spoke:

"Mamma—that's my mamma! She wants her Willie-boy! She says—you ain't my gran'pa, neever! My gran'papa got hair all white like—an' you ugly—des *nawful* ugly mans!"

"Spare my blushes, captain, and—that sounds like business, too!" as another cry came from that same quarter. "We'll

discuss our relative claims to beauty, captain, later on. For now—here we go, tail-on-end!"

A score seconds sufficed to carry Beautiful Jack to the edge of the high river bank, and almost his first glance showed him—what?

Fanny Dingle on a narrow ledge of rock barely raised above the river's level, on the opposite side of the stream. And, what was that the woman shielded with her person? Surely—

"It's mamma—*my* mamma!" cried Willie, excitedly. "An' she's got that old—the deader man, too!"

His shrill, boyish shout reached those ears, and with a cry Mrs. Dingle partly raised up, hand waving, only to stop short as she saw a complete stranger in place of the father whom she naturally expected.

The Double-Edged Sport saw sufficiently to act upon, and hurrying down the rocky bank, he paused when nearly opposite that narrow ledge, to doff hat and call out in distinct tones:

"Can I be of any assistance, madam? I found your little boy, crying from a fall, and thought—what shall I do, first?"

"If you would—if you can help me with this poor man, sir," answered Fanny, moving a little to grant a fairer view of that seeming corpse. "Alone I can hardly manage, but—"

"Of course I'll help, madam. He is—not dead?"

"I hope not; I sincerely trust he yet lives," came the less distinct response as Fanny looked with misty eyes upon the being for whom she had so bravely risked her own life that day. "He was living when I first saw him, but now—oh, sir, it's awful! Poor Mr. Baker—"

"What?" almost fiercely interrupted the stranger, swinging Willie unceremoniously to earth at mention of that name. "Surely you can't mean that—*who* is he, and what has befallen him, please?"

These words came with forced composure, and the distance intervening was too great for Mrs. Dingle to read aright that altered expression.

"It is poor Mr. Baker who owns a mine, or something, further up the river, sir. He has been hurt—badly shot, I fear—"

"Shot? Reese Baker? Those devils shall—wait, ma'am, for I'm coming over to see for myself!"

John Jamison ran a few rods upstream, then measured the distance with a sure eye, knowing that it would cost precious time to try to gain the river-level by descending those rocks.

A long inhalation, then Jamison clenched hands and took a couple of swift strides, leaping far out from the rocks, shooting downward straight and true, to cleave those foam-flecked waters with scarcely an audible splash.

A few seconds later he rose to the surface, hat in hand, shaking the long black locks of hair out of his eyes as he swam powerfully across the swift current.

For such a fine swimmer the feat was nothing to brag of, and with scarcely any difficulty Jack won the advantage he sought, then let himself easily float downstream until at the ledge to which Fanny Dingle had, after a desperate struggle, conveyed the dead or insensible prospector, Reese Baker.

With sure and strong clutch Jamison caught a point of rock, letting the current swing his person around until he lay parallel with the shelf itself, when a deft movement lifted his person upon the rock, where there was barely room for his coming.

One keen glance into the face of the brave woman, then the detective turned all his attention to the silent shape which looked so awfully death-like.

His face, now, was unusually pale, and that diagonal scar fairly glowed by force of contrast. His lips were tight-closed, his strong jaws locked in bulldog fashion, as though he feared to trust himself.

Fanny Dingle shrunk away as far as those limited quarters would permit, for

just then Jack looked anything save kindly or lovable.

Still, those sun-bronzed hands were steady as fate and no medical man could have made a cooler, calmer, more complete examination of the case than did Jack Jamison, allowing for lack of instruments or other aids to the professional.

He found that Reese Baker had received several wounds, all in his front, but only one of which looked as though it might prove surely mortal in the end. For, as yet, death had held aloof, although one less iron-nerved might easily have failed to recognize the fact.

"He is not—he will live, sir?" timidly asked Mrs. Dingle, as this grimly scarred stranger drew back with a long breath.

"There is a spark of life left, madam, but how long that may last will depend on—may I ask how and where you found him, first?"

"Willie saw him first, over yonder," with a gesture toward the bush on the further shore. "He was hanging to that shrub, caught by one wrist, and so I sent my boy after his grandfather, who might aid in rescuing him."

"Over yonder? Then how came he here?" bluntly demanded Jack, sweeping those keen black eyes over that slender, almost girlish figure before again looking across to that swaying bush. "You brought him over? You risked your life in his behalf, then?"

Fanny blushed divinely, and her long-lashed lids lowered before that keenly interested gaze ere it shifted. And, as perhaps the easiest way out of an awkward situation, she briefly told how she attempted to rescue, or at least to hold safe the endangered man until her father could hurry to the spot with a rope to save them both.

She told how, when the faithless fish-line gave way, the current swept her directly down against poor Mr. Baker, her added weight snapping that forked twig short off. And then, more through a providential eddy than her own efforts, they were whirled across the stream and brought close to that shelf of rock.

"That was the hardest; getting him up on the ledge," concluded the embarrassed woman. "Then you and Willie came. And now he is alive? He will recover from—from all this?"

"He still clings to life, yes. As for recovering, there may be one chance in a score, provided he has warmth and care and proper surgical aid," gravely answered the stranger, his heavy brows gathering anew as he looked down upon that ghastly pale and pain-lined visage between them.

Fanny Dingle shrunk anew as she saw that stern and forbidding expression; but she was a brave little woman clear to the core, and as quickly rallied, to speak again:

"My father lives near the foot of the hills; over yonder," with nod and look across the river to the shore where Willie was howling in subdued tones the while. "If Mr. Baker was only across—or if Willie could only take word to his grandfather, even!"

"And there's a doctor to be had at Paradise Park, no doubt? Still, that don't help us any, just now. And I hate to leave my poor old—I mean Mr. Baker, of course."

Fanny made an uneasy gesture, for she found that close company anything save agreeable under the existing circumstances. Her garments were so cold, so wet, so clinging!

And yet, frankly speaking, the dear little woman had scant cause for blushing or for feeling shame on that score. And so Jack Jamison himself would have been first to pronounce, only for—

Just now he seemed to have eyes and thoughts only for the old man whose life-sands seemed running so awfully low. Just now he could give neither thought nor look to feminine charms.

Something of this Mrs. Dingle was quick to note, and that fact gave her renewed courage. And after a brief si-

lence, filled by the rescuer again looking to the wounds received by the old miner, she ventured:

"I would go for father, gladly, if I could only get up these rocks. I could cross over, at the ford; but now—or if I only knew how to swim!"

"I can take you across if you will permit; may I?" asked Jack; and clasping her waist with an arm he slipped into the water.

CHAPTER V.

"ALL FOR YOU, JACKY!"

This was one of the ways peculiarly his own, but if it was not wholly without defect, it certainly possessed some advantages—among them the saving of time on such an occasion as this.

In place of waiting for arguments, or excuses, or even explanations, Jack Jamison took instant action, leaving the rest to follow when more time was to spare.

Fanny Dingle gave a little cry as that strong arm closed about her trim waist and lifted her off the ledge of rock, and as the bold plunge was taken—for apparently there was "no bottom" in front of that shelf—the cold seemed to fairly strike her to the bone.

Instinctively she clung to the stranger, and this, together with her weight, might well have seriously hampered the swimmer in his battle with that strong current; but his head was level and his wits never more keen than right then and there.

With a deft shifting of their relative positions he regained the mastery, speaking crisply the while:

"I'll ferry you safely across if you'll let me, madam. If you will insist on close hugging—there; that's better!"

For Fanny, flushing vividly, in spite of the cold, shrunk from rather than clung to this odd stranger, thus giving the man full use of his limbs once more.

It required but comparatively few sweeps with those powerful arms to carry them over to the further side, but landing where an ascent to the level above was practicable proved to be far less easy.

Clasping that trim shape a bit more closely, now (and it really was a far from disagreeable operation, despite the too-cool element through which that embrace was alone admissible), Jamison permitted himself to float down with the current a few rods further, black eyes keenly scanning those rugged rocks until—

"Here we are, ma'am, at last! Now—easy, please! So. Just hold fast until I can—like this!"

With Fanny holding fast to a convenient part of the rocky shore, it was an easy matter for Jack to swing himself from the water and to assist his fair companion in completing the landing.

Then, half-lifting the woman, Jamison accomplished the rest, getting Mrs. Dingle to the level above just as tear-marked Willie came hurrying along, mingling sobs with smiles and even laughter.

Fanny would have expressed her thanks, but Beautiful Jack would not hear to that, quickly cutting her short with the words:

"Don't mention it, madam. I wish I could do both things, but I'm afraid to leave my—that poor old man all alone long enough to get aid, even if I knew just where to seek it. So—it won't be too much for you, ma'am?"

"No, no; I'll go for father. But how can you get back to poor Mr. Baker, though?"

"The same way I did before. That don't worry me. If I could only feel—but time is mighty precious if we're to do anything good. I hate to say it, ma'am, but—if you'd only hurry—*hurry!*"

In spite of his forced composure Fanny could hardly help seeing how intensely worked up was this stranger, and now, just as it had once before, a startling suspicion flashed across her busy brain.

Who and what was this stranger? Was his interest in poor Mr. Baker anything further than any similar stranger might feel? Was he—

"I'll talk all you care for, later on, madam," bluntly declared the scarred man, seemingly with power to read her very thoughts. "For now we've got to think wholly and solely of yonder poor fellow. Good luck attend you, my dear—captain!"

That title came evidently as an amendment, but it may be doubted whether Fanny Dingle understood, even granting that she fairly heard it.

For that blunt hint had been more than enough, and with cheeks which fairly tingled she caught Willie by a hand and hurried away at the best pace possible amid such surroundings.

John Jamison watched them for a few moments, then filling his deep chest with a long breath, brushing one hand across his damp brows, then picking his way up-stream as rapidly as possible.

Now, as once before, he made no attempt to climb down the rocks to the river's level. He paused long enough to win a final glimpse of the hurrying mother and child, then turned to make his second bold leap into the water below.

The same eddy which had aided Fanny Dingle and her helpless burden to cross to the further side of the stream swept Jack that way, hardly leaving him occasion for swimming. And then, as he reached that narrow ledge of rock, once again he swung alongside, to deftly roll over from water to stone.

There was no change since leaving in company with Mrs. Dingle.

Reese Baker lay precisely as he had been left, looking far more like a corpse than aught of life and vitality.

But, was it so certain that no change had taken place?

Long immersion in the cold water had checked all flow of blood, and for the most part washed away all ugly stains from his coarse garments. But now—surely life was coming back again, else why those fresher stains?

His own face but little less startlingly pale than that of the old miner, Jack parted the clothes above those cruel wounds, catching his breath sharply as he saw how the red blood was once more stirring; for that fact told him Reese Baker was beginning to rally in part from the awful shock he had received.

If that one bullet had missed its mark! It had struck so terribly near the heart, one must be half-crazy to dare hope for life. And yet—

A low, husky moan came through those blanched lips, and a slight shiver agitated that gaunt shape.

Was he regaining his senses? Would he be able to tell how and through whom he had received such terrible injuries?

"Heaven grant so much, anyway!" muttered the Double-Edged Sport, through his grimly clenched teeth, as his eyes caught a red tinge. "Tell me who did it, daddy, and I'll make it the dearest bit of work mortal men ever lay hands to."

That scarred face looked fairly savage as he spoke, and if the authors of that dark deed could have looked upon John Jamison then they might well have been excused for fear and doubting.

There was so miserably little he could do! His own garments were water-soaked and even if he were to rob himself entirely, that could be of poor benefit to this suffering mortal.

Jack slipped out of his heavy flannel shirt, wrapping the garment around his patient as well as he was able, frowning darkly as a few husky words came from those lips, now parted by a quickened breath which almost surely foreboded fever from those wounds.

If help would only arrive; if the poor fellow could be given all the care and outward comforts his sad condition so imperatively demanded! If only—

"God bless her, anyway!" muttered John, as he flashed a look over river. "She'll do all any woman can, and that's a mighty sight more than I ever knew another to do! I wonder—yes, daddy!"

For now Reese Baker stirred restlessly, partly raising his head, only to let it fall back with a moan. Clearly he was beginning to rally from the shock, yet—was that a good symptom or a bad?

"If the fever would keep down!" muttered Jamison, one hand on that forehead where warmth was beginning to come back, the other feeling for the feeble wiry, fluttering pulse at wrist. "If he might have even half a show! Curse such a country, anyway! Ten miles from everywhere, and never a body to be had when sorely needed! And now daddy—easy, now!"

"Don't—don't murder me!" gasped Baker, shrinking away from that kindly touch, clearly confounding this friend with those vile assassins. "I never—oh, don't shoot—you've shot me—all to—pieces!"

With kindly force Jack held the poor miner, soothing him as best he knew how, his gentle tones forming a startling contrast with that scarred face. And, little by little, instead of shrinking away in terror, Reese Baker strove to cling all the closer to him, brain none the less unsettled and eyes apparently deceived.

For now he smiled pitifully, shivering even while clinging to the hand which held him under subjection, those sunken cheeks showing a bit of color which was born of fever rather than healthy strength.

"John—my dear Jacky!" came indistinctly through those parching lips at irregular intervals. "I hoped—I knew you wouldn't—my dear boy wouldn't hold—grudge! Jacky—why did you—I've hoped and prayed—come home, Jacky!"

"Yes, daddy; I've come home, at last!" spoke John, his own tones almost too husky for recognition, his eyes so dimmed that he could only clear them in part by twisting head down to shoulder for an awkward rub, since both hands were occupied with the sufferer.

"I knew you would, Jacky," murmured the wounded miner, lids slowly closing and a faint smile coming to pathetically light up his haggard countenance once more. "I knew—you couldn't stop angry—all the time, Jacky? I never meant—I was out of sorts and—I said more than I—said more—home again, Jacky, lad!"

Jack shivered like one in an ague-chill, but again he assented; yes, he had come home, to remain until—how long?

He feared the very worst, now, for his experienced eye told him that was purely fictitious strength, born of fever. And that—how long would it be ere that feeble remnant of strength was eaten up?

Clinging to one of those strong hands, Reese Baker seemed falling into the heavy stupor once more; and while it seemed a pity to task him more severely, John felt in duty bound to at least make an effort to learn through whose agency the old prospector had fallen into such sad straits.

"Who did all this, daddy?" he asked, speaking slowly and very distinctly. "Who shot you, Daddy Baker? Tell me, that I may avenge you when the right time rolls round; who shot you, daddy?"

"John—it is—really is my Jacky boy?" gasped the wounded man, roused out of that deepening stupor for the moment.

"Yes, daddy; it's really your Jacky boy, come home to stay with you as long as—Daddy! You forgot to tell me; who hurt you, I beg?"

But, instead of speaking clearly as before, only a husky mumbling came from those lips. And with all his eager efforts the most the Man from Gypsum could win was:

"Rich—struck it rich, at last! All for you—all for you, Jacky, boy!"

Convinced at last that his efforts were working harm rather than good, Jami-

son gave over, crouching beside the wounded man, watching and waiting, brows gathered in a portentous frown as he marked what sad havoc had been wrought in that gaunt yet far from ugly face.

"It's your bulge, now, ye devils, but mine 'll come, later on," he muttered, barely above his breath while watching and waiting for the coming of assistance, without which he was so entirely helpless. "I'll never give over until I've ferreted you out, and then—eye for eye, life for life! Sure as there is a heaven over our heads this bitter black day, just so certain will I avenge this—poor old daddy! How little any of us counted on such a home-coming as this!"

Reese Baker lay like one drifting easily from life into death; yet the Double-Edged Detective felt a certain degree of relief as he took notes. That threatened fever was not growing higher, even if it was not dying away. That might be caused by lessening strength, yet his sensitive finger-tip told him pulse was steadying, even growing rounder, fuller, more natural!

If aid would only come!

How far had that fair woman to go ere help was reached? How much longer must they wait? And each minute passed without proper attention just so surely lessened poor Baker's chance for prolonged life.

He looked once more at those wounds, but there was nothing which he could do in that direction further than had already been seen to. All that remained was to wait for the coming of aid with what patience he could summon.

Once or twice Mr. Baker showed signs of awakening senses, and as often would his rescuer endeavor to extract a little information from the suffering miner; but just so often in vain.

Then the Man from Gypsum gave a sharp exclamation of grim pleasure and relief as he caught certain sounds coming from yonder rocky shore; a clear shout, for one thing. And back floated his voice in answer:

"This way! All right so far, at our end of the route!"

The Sport caught sight of a woman's head and shoulders rising above yonder rock-line, and instinctively lifted his hat in a wide flourish, for now he could recognize the brave little woman who had risked so much on behalf of a comparative stranger.

An instant later he saw that Fanny Dingle was not alone; a tall, gaunt, raw-boned looking man, past middle-age, bearing her company.

Past doubting, this was her father—Willie's "gran'pa"—for over one shoulder and arm he bore a coil of rope, while his other hand tugged at the bridle-reins of a shaggy-coated burro, across whose back rested sundry articles which promised to be of good use in the rescue.

"Hello, stranger!" hailed Harlow Crimmins, taking in all at a single glance of his keen gray eyes. "On the wrong side, hain't ye, now? Pity!"

"You live on that side, then? All right; we'll come to you, since you can't well come to us!" and Jack sprang to his feet.

CHAPTER VI.

AT THE MOUNTAIN SHACK.

"Hold on!" cried Crimmins, quickly. "What ye gwine to do, stranger?"

"Cross the drink, of course; what else remains?"

"But, the other critter?"

"I can fetch him along, since I have to. You know that I can swim, madam."

"I know, sir, but the water is so awfully cold!"

"That won't last long, nor hurt the poor fellow much more than lying here in his wet clothes. But, how else can we get to your house, ma'am, if I don't tote him over?"

"Well, there's the ford, further down river, father. Don't you think 'twould be the best plan for us to cross over, then

help him up the rocks yonder? Surely it would be a great deal better than to risk—"

"How far to the ford?" asked the Man from Gypsum, bluntly.

"Mile an' a half down to—"

"And as far back; three miles further to travel, when each minute now is worth an hour later on! No. Can't take the chances on it. I'll fetch the poor fellow right across, cold or no cold. Do you get ready with the rope, that no more time may be lost than is absolutely necessary."

While uttering this decision Jack Jamison was making his brief preparations for the rescue along the lines so boldly marked out by himself.

He removed the flannel shirt in which he had wrapped the wounded man, deftly slipping it back where it properly belonged. A shy glance over the river showed him Fanny Dingle turning away to busy herself about the burro and its burden, and that left him free to act with greater celerity.

This done, John, as gently as might be, moved the wounded and insensible prospector close to the edge of the shelf, then slipped into the water, turning upon his back and with a dexterous effort shifting Reese Baker from rock to his own broad breast.

The added weight sent him fairly under water for an instant, but as quickly his head came up again, and, shoving briskly away from the shore with his feet, Jack held his helpless burden in place with a single hand, using its mate and both feet to swim strongly across that current for the other shore.

Strong man and powerful swimmer though he certainly was, the feat proved to be far from easy. If he could have let Baker float beside him, merely taking care to keep his head above water, there would have been comparatively slight trouble; as it was, by the time both eddy and current were conquered and the other shore reached, John Jamison was for the most part buried in the water, and growing perilously scant of breath as well.

Fanny Dingle was unusually pale and wide-eyed as she watched that heroic struggle against heavy odds, but she could not add her tones to the cheery cries and shouts which broke from the lips of Harlow Crimmins by way of encouragement.

"Glory to the lamb!" ejaculated the old hunter as the swimmer reached shore, clinging to a rock while he cleared his eyes and caught the breath his lungs so sorely needed. "Fer a weenty bit I never thunk—looked like ye hed bit off too mighty a big chaw, stranger; fer a honest fact it jest *did*, now!"

"Oh, I'm right as right. Let down the rope, will you? This isn't the very best medicine in the world for a sick man!"

"Better'n that; I'm comin' my own self," declared honest Harlow, nimbly dropping from rock to rock until he was close at hand. "Jest let me—waal, I be durned!"

For Beautiful Jack, once more himself, without assistance lifted the unconscious prospector clear of the water, following in person with an adroitness which caused Crimmins to stare in admiration.

"There isn't time to waste in ceremony, stranger," quickly spoke the Man from Gypsum. "Every minute left in such condition takes an hour off this poor old fellow's life-lease. And so, the rope, please!"

The Double-Edged Detective found this already fitted with a noose, and seeing as much he spoke on:

"You'd better climb back, sir. I can manage at this end, but you can be of greater service above. I'll throw the slack up after you."

So said, so done. Few men cared to openly dispute Beautiful Jack when he spoke in sober earnest, and Harlow Crimmins ever showed more favorably as follower than as leader.

With an ease and adroitness which proclaimed the mountaineer born and

bred, the gray-beard scrambled back the way he had come shortly before, gaining the upper level by the time the scarred-face man had the rope fairly fitted about the body of the man they were laboring to save.

And so, with Fanny and her father above, following orders as given, and Jack below, almost carrying that lifeless burden in his strong arms, easing the cruel strain of the noose as much as possible, Reese Baker was conveyed up those rocks, safely reaching the top, there to have the rope removed and all possible care and attention given him by both Mrs. Dingle and Jamison.

With all her haste to return, Fanny had been thoughtful enough to fetch a bottle of whisky and some cold coffee, in addition to a little hurriedly picked up food; the last, of course, was of no service in this extremity, but Jack Jamison smiled thankfully as he took note. It gave him a fairer glimpse of the little woman's warm heart if nothing more.

Meanwhile Harlow Crimmins was busy with the burro and its burden, his dexterous hands quickly turning out a more than fair litter, formed by strapping a pole on each side of the donkey, the ends extending far to the rear. Upon this a couple of blankets were secured, forming a fairly comfortable rest as they bagged down in the middle.

First making sure that the wounds were not set to flowing afresh by the exertions forced upon the senseless prospector, Jack tenderly lifted him upon the blankets, then grasped the ends of the two poles, lifting the weight with ease as he spoke:

"Better lead the burro, stranger. Keep him as level as may be, and I'll take care of this end of the craft."

But Fanny sprang to the donkey's head ere her father could take action, and she spoke almost sharply:

"Take one pole and help the gentleman, father. I can lead Jacky, just as well. That will make it easier all around."

Jamison yielded to this command as meekly as did the gaunt mountaineer himself, and so the little procession passed away from the river which had so narrowly escaped hiding for all time a deed of darkness.

The way was rough and toilsome, but Fanny proved to be an admirable guide, picking out the easiest as well as the shortest route practicable, and far sooner than he dared hope for Jack Jamison found their journey was nearly at an end.

Crimmins nodded toward the rising ground lying ahead, drawing a long breath as he spoke, lowly:

"Thar's our shack, stranger. Nur I hain't so mighty sorry, nuther, ef only account o' this pore critter. I never—who done it, reckon?"

"I don't know, but I will—I *must* find out! If I have to leave him in your care, and he rallies sufficiently to talk, *make* him tell how he came this way. Will you?"

"Sure! I'm eetchin' all over my own self fer to find out jest that same why an' whar'fo'," honestly admitted the old hunter and fisherman.

Throughout all that journey never a word nor a sound came from the injured prospector, and it was with almost stilled heart that John bent over the man, now resting upon a bed beneath that humble roof, lest he should find a corpse instead of a living being.

"Alive! And his pulse is—surely he's growing stronger! Unless it means a worse fever," muttered the rescuer, rising erect and brushing a hand across his damp brow.

"If we can do anything more to help him?" gently spoke Mrs. Dingle as she touched her little boy's head in warning to keep silence.

"You can. Warm a blanket to wrap him in after his clothes are removed. Heat his feet as much as you can with—"

out scorching them. But I hardly need tell you further; you're a woman, and that means—everything that's kind, and wise, and good, and—ahem!"

For Fanny turned away with a rising flush, and scarred-face Jack coughed, embarrassedly. Somehow his tongue grew unruly whenever he looked into that fair face—more than fair, too! And—how neat, how trim that shape and figure! How lightly she moved, and how—pah!

But he forced himself to other thoughts, for surely this was no time to indulge in such—nonsense.

He asked Harlow Crimmins how to reach Paradise Park the quickest, and likewise whom he ought to ask for when at the town.

"Of course we want the best medical sharp, and that is—eh?"

"Doctor Eakins. There's only the one in town, but he is—what is it, Fanny, child?"

"Nothing, only—I wish there was another doctor! Not but that—"

"You have nothing to say against him as a doctor, madam?" asked the scarred stranger, earnestly, his dark eyes glowing vividly.

"No, sir. I believe he is a skillful doctor, but—I don't like him as—as a man!" stammered the woman, turning away with a flush.

The Man from Gypsum gazed after Fanny for a brief space, a half-smile brightening up his rugged features the while. But he gave a start, and turned to the open door.

"Do the best you know how for—for the poor old man, friends. I'll fetch the doctor just as quick as I can go and we can come. Until then—heaven bless you both, and God preserve my old—old friend!"

The Sport sprang outside and trotted off, intending to lose as little time as might be in securing medical aid for Reese Baker.

The minutes dragged on slowly enough to the inmates of that little mountain shack, for there was so little they could do, now that Reese Baker was wrapped in heated blankets with a hot flatiron at his feet.

Then, as time crept on, that gray-crowned head began to roll restlessly from side to side, those sunken cheeks to catch a hectic glow, and low mutterings to come through those fever-parched lips.

Willie was sent away to play by himself, but father and daughter watched over the sufferer, now interchanging quick glances of growing interest, now fairly holding breath the better to listen to those broken sentences, trying to make good sense out of what surely appeared to be mere nonsense from their point of view.

Then that restlessness lulled, and Fanny in a whisper asked her father if it would not be best to take his rifle and look for a squirrel, or a grouse, or other dainty food which an injured man might possibly relish in the near future.

"All right, little lady! Ef he gits sobered up, though, see ef you cain't coax him to tell who done banged him up so rusty. He wanted me to find out, an' I promised I would ef I could. So—eh?"

Fanny promised to do her best, though she hoped the patient would sleep quietly, now, and Harlow Crimmins left the house with his rifle.

For possibly another half hour quiet reigned; then Reese Baker opened his eyes and actually strove to rise in bed!

Fanny checked him, and his own strength suddenly failing, he sunk back again, pantingly.

Still, he seemed wonderfully improved, everything considered, and for the first time Mrs. Dingle took hope that he might even yet rally and pull through this trouble all right.

Reese Baker spoke, and after a bit his tongue began to wag with amazing fluency. His glittering eyes and flushed cheeks betokened a rising fever, yet he

seemed perfectly sensible, and to fully appreciate all that had been and was then being done for himself.

He evidently recognized how Fanny had saved his life at the river, for he thanked her repeatedly, only changing the subject after her begging him to rest quietly, lest harm should come of so much excitement.

Still he talked on, now plainly fevered if not actually delirious; and each passing minute but made matters worse, greatly to the poor woman's dismay, she being so utterly helpless.

Reese Baker spoke mutteringly of his past, of his son, and of the unfortunate quarrel which led to his "Jacky, boy" running away from home and never returning, despite all the hopes and prayers and unheard pleadings of his repentant father.

"I thought he would come—I felt that my Jacky, boy, was coming home! I think he would have come, only for—those devils! Don't murder me! I never—ha, ye demons! Ye think to rob me—to steal away the precious gold which—all for Jacky, boy!"

A brief pause, as though from exhaustion, then the wounded prospector reached out a skinny hand to clutch Fanny by an arm, his voice sounding almost hissing as the words came forth:

"Those devils—those grinning devils! I'll cheat 'em—I *must* fool them, I tell you, girl! I'll never rest easy in my grave while they riot in my wealth which I—it's my gallant lad's, don't you hear?"

"Stop! Don't shoot—why should I be so—and Jacky is coming home! Is coming—is he, though?"

Releasing the frightened woman, Reese Baker clasped both hands to his now painfully throbbing temples. Then he gave a hollow groan, followed by the husky, indistinct words:

"All for my Jacky, boy! Only for him, in spite of the devils who—too late! I drove him away with my cursed temper! I drove him away, to ruin, to death, to—or—surely I saw him, but now? Surely I saw him—dead! Yes, I saw my John—my Jacky, boy; saw him a—a corpse!"

CHAPTER VII.

JACK JAMISON MEANS BUSINESS.

John Jamison had a tolerably accurate idea as to the location of Paradise Park, the one town in that mining section, and knowing how important it was that medical aid reach Reese Baker as quickly as might be brought to pass, gave precious little chance for grass to grow beneath his feet that bright day.

He broke into a long, swinging yet fairly easy trot immediately on leaving the mountain shack, never stopping for backward look or parting glance, yet taking note of the purling spring and tiny brook which came into existence not far from the path he was then following, and which doubtless supplied the good people yonder with water for household needs.

A curve in that trail soon carried him out of eye-range from the mountain shack, and then the Man from Gypsum settled down to his work, running with head erect, chest thrown out, and shoulders held well back, elbows pressing close against his ribs.

His every movement betokened the trained athlete, while he ran with a graceful ease hardly to be looked for in a man of his massive build and extra dimensions.

His brain was to the full as busy as his legs, and over and over again the question was asked:

"Who shot him? Who could have done this cruel deed?"

Dearly as he wished it, the Man from Gypsum hardly dared hope for recovery in this case. He felt that one, at least, of those wounds must almost surely prove fatal. If so, but one thing remained for him to do; find the criminals and punish them accordingly.

"Devils—right well he named them! If I can find—when I do find them, as

they treated him, even so will I measure forth punishment to them, be they two, three, a dozen or more! I swear it, by memory of the past when—poor old daddy! And he called me—his Jacky, boy!"

How much of it all had been mere delirium? How much of truth had been contained in these broken ravings? Had he indeed "struck it rich," and had this evil plight come through that ill-starred find?

"Was I right in waiting? Ought I to have told him—all?" mused the Double-Edged Detective, as he came down to a walk while breasting that sharp rise. "When he recognized—when he called me—that, ought I to have told him—everything?"

That strong face betrayed stronger emotions, now, and during the next few moments it was pure instinct which held Jack to the line laid out for his feet to follow.

"He looked as though he knew; but, he was out of his senses, poor daddy! If I had spoken then; would it have been wise? Could he have borne up under the surprise? Would he—even now—"

The young man snatched hat from head and tossed back his long hair. Just then it seemed as though his brain was being badly crowded, for he could not decide after his usual fashion.

He filled his lungs with a long breath of fresh air as he reached the crest of that stony divide, from thence catching his first glimpse of Paradise Park, still far away in the distance, lying on lower and more fertile ground.

That glimpse seemed to do him good, for he put on hat again, nodding vigorously, then muttered further:

"I'll wait and see how his hurts pan out, first. Poor old pap! If he only knew—*will* he ever know it all? He's hard as nails, even yet, but there's true gold underlying it all! I know—who knows better? If I could only think which would be wisest—wait, boy Jack!"

As with an effort the Man from Gypsum cast aside that worrying doubt, pressing ahead, eager to reach yonder far-off goal, where alone he could expect to obtain the assistance which the wounded prospector so sorely needed.

"If the medicine-sharp is on deck, though! And—why did the little woman look and act so queerly? Could this doctor—Eakins, the old man called him—wonder what's happened between the pair? The kid called her mamma, and she said—where's her husband, though?"

Again the Sport fell into troubled thought, and once more he forced those awkward reflections away from his mind, feeling that for the time being he must think and act solely for the benefit of yonder sufferer, "poor old pap!"

From that moment on Jack bent all his energies toward reaching Paradise Park, for the most part keeping up a steady dog-trot which covered ground far more rapidly than one would think at first look.

Few trained athletes would have betrayed less exhaustion than did this man from the mountains when he slowed up at the edge of town. His face was a bit flushed and sweat-marked, his broad chest rising and falling a bit more rapidly than common; but beyond that Jack Jamison seemed ready to repeat the feat in as good or even better time.

Barring the fact that he was a stranger within their gates, there was nothing about Scarred-face John to call for particular attention from any of the loungers to be seen on the main street, but he had no time to waste in idle ceremony, and stopping short in front of a saloon which appeared to be a favorite with the leisurely denizens, he doffed hat to wipe his temples, bluntly asking:

"I say, friends, who claims to be the best medicine-sharp in your burg just now?"

"What's the matter? You don't look much like a sick man."

"Well, I'm in a fair state of health just

at present, but it does make me sick to have to repeat a civil question," coolly declared the Man from Gypsum, flashing a keen look from face to face as though summing up his present company.

"Got you, there, Johnny!" chuckled another of the little group, then volunteering the information asked for himself. "Dr. Ralph Eakins is your man, stranger."

"He's the only drug-store we've got, anyway."

"But he's just about as good as they make 'em, for all that. Somebody caught a hurt—eh?"

"Dr. Ralph Eakins, is it?" repeated Jack, just as though this was the first time that name had come to his ears. "Where does he hang forth? Where'll I be most likely to find him, please?"

"Well, just about this time o' day—"

"There he is right now!" cut in a third member of the lounging squad, nod of head and fling of right hand directing eyes up and across the street. "With Hugh Forepaugh. If you really want—"

The Sport instantly took note of the parties thus indicated—two in number, walking close together, with heads slightly bowed as though deep in conversation of no ordinary interest.

Two men, both fairly tall, each one well dressed for a rough mining town where style is at a discount and easy comfort at a corresponding premium.

Either might have passed among strangers as a doctor, even as each might have been greeted as gambler or sport at large; but as by instinct Jamison singled out physician from gambler, and his guess proved to be correct.

Without waiting to give thanks or receive further advice, the Man from Gypsum strode that way, at the same time calling out sharply:

"I say, doctor; I want you!"

Swift as thought itself the two men wheeled about, facing in that direction, each right hand moving toward pistol-bearing hip with a unanimity which would have looked fairly suspicious in a less "wild and woolly" part of this, our great and glorious country.

Jack Jamison instantly flung up a hand, open palm to the front as a sign of amity, adding the words:

"Flag of truce, gentlemen, please. I'm not seeking trouble, but looking for aid instead."

"Who are you, and what do you want with me?" sternly demanded the person whom Jamison had set down as the medicine-sharp.

"You are Dr. Eakins, I take it?"

"Well?"

"If you can only make it well, doctor!"

"What do you mean by that, sir?"

"That you're wanted, and wanted badly, doctor. To save life, not to take it, so you hardly need pull your gun on a fellow," added Jamison, with a faint smile showing itself. "Do you meet every fellow who runs for a doctor after this fashion, my dear fellow?"

A half-smothered laugh came from the loungers who had drawn near the spot, looking for trouble, or at least something to break the dull monotony which usually reigned through daylight in a mining town.

Dr. Eakins frowned darkly, but his right hand came more fully into view, without bringing a weapon along.

"If you're in earnest, say so. What is it you mean, anyway?"

"That medical and surgical aid is wanted for a wounded man, and I'm told you are the only doctor within reach, right now. Will you go with me, sir?"

"Where to, first?"

"Out in the hills a bit. You know the place, I reckon; Harlow Crimmins, he said his name was."

This terse explanation produced a little sensation, for the old hunter and fisherman appeared to be well known in Paradise Park. Dr. Eakins gave a slight start at the name, then quickly said:

"What's happened the old man? Wounded, you say? Shot himself?"

"An old man, yes; but not that one. Reese Baker, they called him, but he's over at the shack and—eh?"

Dr. Eakins gave a slight recoil which broke off that hasty explanation, but he rallied as quickly, to utter:

"You needn't waste further time, sir. I've had all I want of those people, and you can look elsewhere for medical assistance."

"But—oh, come, now!"

"I've said it. Sorry, but business is business. If I could—shot, you said? How, and whom by?"

"Wish I could tell you, but I can't, as yet. He's badly hurt, and unless he has aid of the right sort, and that in a hurry, reckon he'll not live to tell just how he came so. So, come, man! You can't in common decency refuse to lend your aid in such an emergency as this."

"I told you I had other and more important business on hand," retorted the physician, drawing back a pace or two, shrugging his shapely shoulders the while.

"Nonsense, man! Come, I say! You must come!"

"No."

"What?" with hot anger beginning to show itself in face as in tones. "You refuse to help—why, man, dear! That poor old fellow is hurt so badly that 'twill be a miracle if his life is spared! And his one frail chance for life lies in speedy help, such as only a physician can give."

"What is all that to me, sir?"

"It ought to be everything to you, sir! As a doctor—"

"I am speaking as a medical man, sir," with a cold bow, at the same time moving on. "I have other patients to whom my time and services are due, and you can—possibly secure aid from some of these gentlemen."

Jack Jamison seemed taken completely by surprise, and for a few seconds scarcely knew what to say or to do. But then his scar flamed forth in purple warning, and he sternly cried out:

"Steady, you! Come with me, I tell you!"

"I'm too busy to even think—"

"Come, I tell you! Come as a physician, or—come as a cur!" fairly thundered the Man from Gypsum, stepping forward with strong right hand going out to grasp arm or shoulder. "You've got to go or I'll—"

Just then came a cry of warning from one of the citizens.

CHAPTER VIII.

REESE BAKER MAKES A WILL.

The wounded miner was clearly out of his head, now, and for a little while Fanny Dingle shrunk away from his bedside in fear and trembling.

This was an entirely new experience for her, and brave though she undeniably was, the little woman hardly knew how to act or what steps to take.

Fortunately that outburst seemed to relieve the injured man, or it may have been growing weakness which caused him to lie quiet, eyes half unveiled and bony fingers feebly working.

That fever-flush still remained, but as quiet reigned Fanny, in her ignorance, rather welcomed the flush as indicative of returning strength, and she began to hope that, after all, Reese Baker might prove less seriously injured than they had been led to believe.

She knew the queer old fellow fairly well by sight, and had a number of times "passed the time o' day" with him when a casual meeting happened. She knew that rumor had it the old fellow owned a rich gold-mine, out of which he took barely sufficient to pay his way and provide rations for his lonely self.

There were passing hints and rumors anent a wondrous store of gold in dust, beans, nuggets, which this odd old codger had accumulated through his secret labors; but until now the little old woman had paid scant attention to the idle chatter; for such she had deemed it.

But now as she sat near the wounded man, thinking over all that had come to pass since she set forth upon her tour of duty anent the fishing lines and traps, Fanny Dingle caught herself recalling those rumors and believing that there must be at least some foundation for them all.

Why else should this cruel treatment have come his way? For what other reason could those terrible unknown persons have attempted this poor life?

For something more than another half-hour Reese Baker lay without motion, only his faintly rising and sinking chest showing that life lingered.

Mrs. Dingle began to hope that this quietude might last until the return of the stranger with medical aid, and several times she stepped noiselessly to the door, gazing in the direction of Paradise Park, although reason told her 'twas yet too soon to really expect a return.

As Fanny turned back from her third trip to the door, she gave a low ejaculation of mingled fear and wonder, for she saw Reese Baker lifting his head and trying to support his person upon a bent elbow.

Her recoil was brief, for she felt that such exertion was dangerous in a person so seriously injured. She sprang to the bedside, speaking even as her little hands gently forced the wounded miner back upon his pillow:

"Pray don't—you really ought not to stir, dear Mr. Baker! If I can—tell me what I can get for you, sir, and I'll gladly help you."

"You are—angel from—heaven!"

Huskily came the words as the wounded prospector yielded to the gentle force which he was too weak to combat. And Fanny saw just the ghost of a smile flit into and out of that pain-lined visage.

"I am your friend, Mr. Baker, and I wish to help—"

"I know. I saw you when—you saved me from—water," interrupted the old man, his words coming in little jerks, yet his voice sounding clearer and stronger. "I thank you—for all, dear. I wish I—prove to you how—I will! I can—I will prove it!"

Still stronger grew his voice, and that ominous color stole back to his sunken cheeks once more.

Fanny begged the poor old man to wait until he was better able to talk, but Reese Baker shook his head with feeble yet strong obstinacy.

"No. Too late. I must—cheat those devils who—who—"

"Who injured you, Mr. Baker?" asked Fanny, mindful of her father's parting charge. "Tell me their names."

"Devils—both devils! I saw them when—I thought it might be my boy Jacky come home to—where is he, now?"

Again the wounded miner strove to rise, and once more Mrs. Dingle restrained him, using only such force as she found absolutely necessary.

He was so weak, so pitifully weak! And only such a brief time before she had known him so wiry and active, brisk-moving as a boy, full of life and vitality, tough as a seasoned pine-knot. And now—alas!

For a few minutes Reese Baker lay like one utterly exhausted, and poor Fanny was beginning to fear her well-meant efforts had wrought more harm than good; but then he rallied afresh, his eyes looking more natural as they opened to rest upon that comely face bending over him.

A faint smile came into his face, and his voice, though weak, surely sounded more like that of a man in his sound senses.

"I thank you, dear. I know all you've done. Only for you—that horribly cold water!"

"Don't talk, I beg of you, sir."

"But—I must talk!" with a faint echo of his old-time abruptness. "I've got to cheat—those demons who—killed me!"

"You will recover, Mr. Baker, and then—"

"No, dear. You mean it, but—you're wrong," calmly declared the wounded miner. "I've caught my last sickness. I'll never live to see another day. I know; I've been warned—and that's why I must—I must work now! Get me—paper and pen. I wish to—cheat those devils who—I *must* fool 'em, girl! I couldn't rest in my—help me cheat 'em, I beg of you, dear child!"

With a low, half-choked cry Fanny turned toward the front entrance, for just then the sound of footsteps reached her ears.

A moment later the gaunt shape of Harlow Crimmins showed in the opening, and ere he could speak, his daughter sprang that way, half-sobbing through her sorely overtasked emotions.

"Oh, father! I'm so glad you've come! Poor Mr. Baker is—I'm afraid he is about to—"

The old hunter stood rifle against the wall, dropping a couple of mountain grouse and a few squirrels in a corner as he stepped toward the bed, his keen eyes trying to suit that change in light.

Before he could distinguish enough to speak with intelligence, the wounded miner spared him that trouble.

His voice was stronger, and his words came with fewer breaks than at any time since his rescue from that pendant bough in the river. Certainly there seemed no indication of immediate dissolution.

"I'm glad you've come, sir," Baker spoke, feebly lifting a hand by way of further greeting. "I want to cheat the devils who murdered me like—I hadn't the ghost of a chance, curse 'em!"

"Who was they?" eagerly asked Crimmins, powerful curiosity showing in tones as upon face the while. "Tell me who done ye up so turrible, square, an' I'll see that they don't git cl'ar 'though—eh?"

"Don't chatter like a magpie, but give me—writing materials!" almost harshly demanded the invalid. "Quick! I can't die without—I must cheat those—they're playing for my mine, but that is all for my son, Jacky! I swore—quick, will you? Don't let me die without—it's too late for my poor, wronged lad, but I must—I *must* cheat 'em!"

"Poor man!" sighed Fanny, yet greatly relieved now that she had her father to aid and confide in. "I sadly fear he is out of his poor, dear head, and that all this excitement will—"

"No, I'm not crazy," distinctly averred the wounded miner, with an added luster in his dark eyes. "I know what I'm saying. I know what I wish to do. To make a will which—to cheat those devils who butchered me in hopes of winning my—the mine I was nursing for—for my poor, wronged Jacky, boy!"

"You've got the truck; fetch 'em," whispered Harlow Crimmins, a dim hope beginning to dawn upon his busy brain.

And so, as Fanny seemed reluctant to obey lest harm come to yonder poor man, the father brought pen and ink and paper, with a book amply large enough to serve as desk at a pinch.

With feverish eagerness Reese Baker grasped the penholder, huskily bidding the mountaineer lift him higher so that he might see how to write, again vowing that his last wish in life was to cheat the demons who had so savagely misused him.

Again Fanny ventured to whisper a remonstrance, but both men frowned at her interruption, one because he was determined to write, the other through growing eagerness to see what words that trembling hand would put upon record.

Supported by the mountaineer, then, Reese Baker wrote slowly, painfully, yet taking particular pains to form each word and letter so distinctly that no room would be left for disputing his intentions.

And with eyes which fairly glowed Harlow watched the slow shaping of word after word, for he saw—what?

A brief yet clear will which left all

property, of every description, of which the testator died possessed, to Fanny Dingle and her heirs forever!

Suspecting something of this by watching her father's face, Mrs. Dingle took opportunity to steal a look at the paper when Reese Baker paused to rest ere signing his name, and then she gave a low cry of remonstrance, which lacked little of being fairly indignant as well.

"No, no; you must not—you shall not do this, Mr. Baker!"

"I will, I must," faintly yet doggedly declared the wounded man. "You saved me. You risked your life for me. You are good and true and faithful. I must cheat—those bloody-minded demons!"

"But not this way, sir," earnestly cried Fanny, paying no heed to the frowns and gestures of her angry parent, intent solely upon having full justice done. "Your son is the one who ought to have all this."

"My poor Jacky, boy! I know. I would, only—he's gone—dead!"

"No he is *not* dead! He still lives, for he saved you when I was helpless, Mr. Baker," swiftly argued the woman. "He has gone even now to bring medical aid in order to save your life! *He* must be the one—"

"No, child," with a faint, sad smile coming and fading away, while a trembling hand moved far enough to gently touch that head. "Jack is dead. I saw him—when I was—dead, too! I know—"

"He lives, I say! You recognized him when—you called him son, and he called you father!"

"Because he 'lowed the pore man was out of his head," quickly suggested Harlow Crimmins. "Don't kick up sech a bobbery, child! *He* knows what he wants, I reckon. An' so—jest go see whar Willie is, girl."

Reese Baker smiled again, then nodded his head slightly, fingers tightening upon the penhandle once more as he reached for the ink.

"Wait. I know; but to satisfy you; wait, little lady!"

And then, slowly, with increasing difficulty, he wrote other words, pausing again before appending his signature, to slowly ask:

"You are married, my dear?"

"She was, but her man's done gone dead," hastily volunteered Crimmins before Mrs. Dingle could make answer.

"Good! That makes it easier—much easier!" mumbled Mr. Baker, adding a few more words, then forming his full name in large, clear characters before dropping pen for good and all.

"I've left all my property to you, my dear," he said, smiling like one vastly relieved as his head was lowered upon the pillow by the old hunter. "I know my poor Jacky is dead before me. Hush! I know what I *do* know! I've seen him—not in the flesh, but—I *have* seen him!"

"Still, to satisfy your scruples I've written—tell her, you!"

"That you're to marry his boy Jack ef so be he ever comes back hyar alive," bluntly added Crimmins, paying no heed to the hot flush and shocked recoil of his daughter.

And then, drawing a long, deep breath as of intense relief, Reese Baker turned his head on the pillow, lying there like one falling fast asleep or—was it sinking into the clasp of grim death?

And Harlow Crimmins, grinning all over his rugged face, carefully secured that important document, the last will and testament of Reese Baker, mine-owner and reputed miser!

CHAPTER IX.

JACK'S COOL DEAL.

"Look out, Sport—it's a double-banking!"

That warning cry came from one of the citizens who evidently possessed a sense of fair play, and was drawn forth by the sudden action taken by Hugh Forepaugh gambler and sport-in-general.

As already shown, this personage was fully as prompt in reaching for "a gun" as had been his companion, Dr.

Ralph Eakins, when the loud call came from lips of the stranger.

When Jack centered his notice upon the man of medicine to his exclusion, Hugh Forepaugh dropped a bit out of the ring, evidently willing enough to let the matter pass him by entirely.

But as matters took a sharper turn, finally promising to pass on still further, the gambler clearly felt a more powerful interest in the matter, edging his way closer to this bold-speaking stranger.

And when Jack took that decided step, plainly meaning to carry his way or learn the full reason why, Forepaugh himself took action.

With the gambler it was clearly meant to be strike first and warn later if at all, but for once in his life Hugh calculated without his master.

As though warned by instinct in addition to that sharp cry from a newly-won friend, the Man from Gypsum ducked head and turned swiftly, left arm rising to guard head and face, while its mate—

"A prettier lick I never *did* see in all my personal experience, gentlemen!" enthusiastically averred Major McCann, later on.

It was what has since become noted as "the pivot blow," tight-clenched fist making fair and full connection with jaw, weight of body and force of swing adding double effect to the stroke.

His own vicious blow was foiled, that wasted impulse bringing him within short range, and Hugh Forepaugh hardly knew what manner of earthquake had struck him.

Lifted clear off his feet, the athletic gambler was sent endlong more than his own length away, striking earth with a sodden sound which plainly indicated that all fight was knocked out of the fellow, for a time at least.

The Double-Edged Detective never paused to follow up the advantage so easily won, nor yet to make sure his swinging blow was a complete success.

With that same swing he again faced the man of medicine, jerking pistol from belt and bringing it to a level with one and the same movement.

None too soon, either.

Dr. Eakins was in the act of drawing, but just as he felt the weapon coming free, he saw that forty-four leap to the front and heard the clear, stern command:

"Go easy, Doc! You pull that gun and I'll ruin the drug business in this blessed burg! Easy—or chaw lead!"

Jack meant well enough, as all who took notes could see and realize without further explanation, but in his natural desire to aid poor Reese Baker, the Man from Gypsum added a goodly bit to his own risk: something which an old and experienced "chief" would hardly have done under less extenuating circumstances.

Cat-like himself, Ralph Eakins ducked and leaped to one side, jerking revolver clear from pocket and coat-tails at the same instant, lifting the double-acting hammer even as his hand flew up for a snap-shot.

Again the detective exemplified the beauties of duck-and-dip, letting that pellet of lead hum viciously past an ear without breaking skin or marring beauty, his own gun barking the fraction of an instant later.

A savage cry broke from the doctor's lips as he involuntarily recoiled, but he tried to work his gun again—tried in vain.

Whether through pure chance or a marvelous degree of skill, that single shot from the stranger's forty-four had effectually disabled the battery he faced: his shot fairly jamming against cylinder and barrel, preventing the turn without that rude plug was first cut away.

"Steady, I tell you, Doc!" cried the Man from Gypsum, once more, rising erect and covering his adversary with a remarkably business-like weapon, at the same time deftly stepping around to bring all others in his front, thus leav-

ing his rear free from further worry and peril.

"You infernal—I'll kill you like a—"

"Don't make me do the slaughter-house business, please," coolly cut in the victor in that impromptu duel, holding the physician lined with all the certainty of an expert. "I'm mild as new milk when you don't monkey too mighty much, but then—ware cut fingers! I'm double-edged and warranted to cut to the bone. I'm fresh from hone and strop, warranted to split a floating cobweb on one side, or mince a crowbar with the other! And—must I skin you, Doc?"

Again and again the man of medicine strove to work his pistol, for the moment failing to realize how thoroughly the weapon was disabled.

His handsome face was almost ghastly pale, now, but that came from hot rage rather than personal fear.

"You cur! I'll kill you like—"

"Go easy, doctor," cut in the stranger, holding key to situation with admirable skill the while. "I'm not asking a dose of your skill for myself, so that don't count. I only want—steady, all!"

His voice rose higher, grew sterner and more menacing as he noted a stir among the spectators which, rightly or wrongfully, he interpreted as a movement to benefit the cornered physician.

"Don't monkey with the buzz-saw, gents! I can take the town if I just have to, but I'd rather play white while—white play comes my way as well! Fair warning, everybody!"

"I'm Beautiful Jack, from Gypsum, with a double-edge! My pretty mouth was built up for kissing, but I can bite if I just have to, and then—business for coroner, sexton, and crawling worms o' grave and sepulcher grim!"

With smooth dexterity the good right hand which had so easily laid low the pride and body of Hugh Forepaugh, armed itself, muzzle sweeping quickly back and forth to cover all that assembly, its mate still holding Dr. Eakins covered after the same fashion as at first.

One man against more than a score, yet that single-hand seemed to hold all high trumps!

A few recoiled, but more lifted empty hands in protest against such a turn of the cards, while none took step toward the audacious stranger.

Even Ralph Eakins seemed taken aback, and Jack was swift to make the best of the advantage won.

"Fair play is good enough for a hog, and that's all I'm grunting after, gentlemen. My business is with Dr. Ralph Eakins, and so long as you don't wipe feet on the tail of my coat—understand?"

"Give me half a show, sir, and I'll business you!" surlily growled the man of medicine, looking to see what was the matter with his pistol, then flinging it away with a vicious force which spoke volumes for his hot temper.

"I'm giving you an entire show, dear fellow," smoothly retorted the Double-Edged Sport, still holding the drop like one who was determined to carry his point without more squabbling after the advantage. "Circus, menagerie, side-show and blowers thrown in for good measure! And—now I'm getting down to solid business, doctor.

"I want you. I want you badly. I'm going to take you with me, a living doctor or a dead ass! Take your choice: which shall it be?"

"I'll see you eternally—"

"Go easy, pardner! Swear not lest thou be cussed back again. I've come all this way for a man of medicine, and when I start for anything, that same thing comes my way or the whole world loses its equal-abraham.

"Your professional aid is sorely needed, over yonder at the Crimmins' shack. I was sent after you. I've found you. You know just what is wanted. Now— which shall it be?"

"You're going back with me, in one

shape or the other. If I can't take you alive, I'll do the next best thing. Now—your choice, my dear doctor!"

With glib distinctness came all this, leaving no chance for interruption or break until he himself saw fit to give an opening. And then, smiling blandly as one might who proffered choice between apple and peach, the Double-Edged Sport, waited for a decision.

It was a bitter pill for so proud a man as Dr. Eakins to swallow, but that forty-four was staring him squarely in the face, and he could see finger-tip curving around the polished trigger just as easily.

Only a fool would invite certain death, and Ralph Eakins was far from being an idiot of that caliber. A bitter pill, but better than one such as rested at the bottom of yonder black-muzzled death-tube!

"Where am I wanted, and what for?"

"At the house of Harlow Crimmins, to treat an old man who has been pretty nigh shot to pieces. His name is Reese Baker, I believe," quietly but quickly explained the Man from Gypsum. "Will you go, doctor?"

"Who did the shooting? Has he explained that as yet?"

"Not when I left. I doubt if he ever will unless—come, doctor; there's no time to waste and—"

"All right. I'll go, if you will guarantee my fees," coldly decided the man of medicine, evidently bent on making his descent as graceful as might be. "I've had a little experience with this Mr. Crimmins, and, not to put too fine an edge upon it, he's no good when it comes to paying for services rendered. So—do you pledge yourself?"

"Willingly. What's worth having is well worth paying for. I'll see that you get your fees, doctor, right enough."

"Very well, sir. I'll go get my horse and overtake you by the time you are fairly—"

"Easy, doctor," quickly cut in the Double-Edged Sport. "You might forget that a fellow of my size and beauty was waiting on the anxious seat, and so—two is good company right now, don't you reckon?"

"What am I to understand from this, sir?"

"That I'm so mightily stuck on your shape that I can't bear to lose sight of you, even for a weenty minute, dear doctor," smoothly declared the Sport from Gypsum, left hand replacing revolver the easier to slip through the arm nearest him just then.

This movement brought him more squarely face to face with Hugh Forepaugh, whom one of his friends had assisted to arise, though the gambler seemed dazed and half-stupefied from the effects of that swift pivot-blow.

Reaching out with the revolver still held in hand, Beautiful Jack lightly tapped the gambler on a shoulder, speaking in cold, hard accents:

"Can you take a hint without a kick, stranger? I don't like your looks. You're the sort to slip knife under short-ribs from behind. Don't take the trouble to dog us, please. Stop right here where you're better known, and maybe the green grass won't grow quite so quickly over your grave: understand, Johnny?"

Beautiful Jack paid no further heed to the gambler, moving away in company with the doctor, leaving Hugh Forepaugh to growl and mutter and bluster as best suited his tastes, just then.

Outwardly suave and genial Jamison kept guard over the man of medicine during all that followed, watching him while preparing horse for the road, never once giving fair opening for turning of tables, supposing Ralph Eakins should feel so disposed.

But apparently nothing was further from the doctor's mind than any such radical action, and more than once his mustached lip curled in silent scorn as this armed messenger shifted position in order to ever keep adversary in his front.

"You might spare yourself all this

trouble, sir," coldly spoke Dr. Eakins as he led his horse from stable. "My first duty is to my patient, but then—I pledge you my word of honor that I'll ask you to settle our little account, promptly enough!"

CHAPTER X.

DR. EAKINS AND HIS PATIENT.

Reese Baker sunk into what appeared more of a natural sleep than the heavy stupor which had before held possession, and with a satisfied smile upon his face Harlow Crimmins seated himself by the bed to hold watch and ward, now and then stealing a covert glance at that bit of writing which held so high a value in his estimation, now.

Mrs. Dingle lingered for a little, hardly knowing what to do, but then she stole on noiseless tiptoes out of room and shack, seeking her little boy and joining in his childish sport with evident pre-occupation.

That slumber lasted but a few minutes until it was broken with a start, and partly rising on an arm, Reese Baker muttered a few indistinct words. Then, sinking back once more, he slipped a hand into his bosom, winking rapidly as though wishing aid.

"You got somethin' thar which wants out, is it?" asked the mountaineer, with sharpened wits.

"Yes. My—papers. Take 'em—for the girl who—don't let those devils know how much—they'll kill—kill!"

Crimmins quickly acted, bringing a couple of blood-stained papers from a secret pocket in that flannel shirt, pausing to ask:

"Them's 'um, pardner? An' I'm to take keer o' them fer ye, eh?"

"Yes. Until—hold the mine for—for her, now my boy is—forgive me, Jacky, dear! I never meant—half what I said when—forgive your old pap for—I'm so—sleepy!"

His voice died out in a gentle sigh, his head turned again on the pillow, his limbs relaxed, and once more slumber claimed possession.

Harlow Crimmins waited until certain that his involuntary guest was fairly lost in slumber, or a stupor which closely resembled it, then he cautiously unfolded the papers, one after the other.

He caught his breath with a little gasp which was almost painful, for he hardly expected this; the title-deeds and regular patent to that much-rumored mine were now in his own hands!

These papers taken in connection with the will which Reese Baker had so recently executed, surely would prove all-sufficient?

"An' Fanny 'll be wuth—wuth—oh, good Lawd!"

Harlow Crimmins flung up his hands, for the time being unable to fairly comprehend the magnitude of the good luck which had so unexpectedly come their way. For, as a matter of course, he would share equally with his widowed daughter in this bonanza. Unless—

"Good Lawd-ee!" again exploded the old mountaineer. "What ef Fanny was right? What ef—that pesky scar-face! Ef he should be—an' thar shouldn't be—thunder an' guns!"

But, little by little that sudden cloud passed away, and from scowling Harlow Crimmins passed to smile, then to grin, ending with a subdued laugh as he again read that briefly-worded will left in his care.

Then, as Reese Baker seemed soundly sleeping and able to get along without close watching for at least a few minutes, Crimmins stole quietly out of the house, seeking his daughter, finding her near the spring where Willie had left her for other amusement.

Then, cautiously feeling his way at first, but speaking bolder and with less disguise as he went on, Crimmins showed Fanny the different papers, making her understand their full meaning from his point of view.

Her face flushed painfully as she read the last lines written by the wounded

mine-owner: saw set down in black and white his dying wish that, in case his "boy Jacky" should ever return, the twain might become as one, in order to share the fortune left between them!

Before Fanny could make reply to these far from delicate or welcome hints let fall by her father, she caught first glimpse of the returning messenger, who was briskly keeping pace with the doctor, even though the latter was mounted upon a horse whose sweat-damp flanks betrayed the fact that no speed had been spared.

Hastily urging her father to keep secret those documents, if only for her sake, Fanny hastened over to the cabin, there to make such arrangements and improvements as only a woman can think of in such cases.

She barely noticed the grave bow given her by Ralph Eakins as he left horse and crossed that threshold, and she left the cabin without so much as looking toward Jack.

A single glance told Dr. Eakins that his patient was sleeping or dead; a second decided in favor of the first; and then, with his gravest professional air, he spoke to Harlow Crimmins, asking a number of questions concerning the injured mine-owner.

"Yes, Mr. Baker had recovered consciousness, and had seemed fairly rational; had talked some little, apparently with understanding, but had said nothing to indicate how, by whom, or why he had been treated so hardly."

"You asked him, distinctly, who hurt him, then?" persisted Eakins.

"Yes, but he never said; 'peared like I couldn't make him understand. Jest said them devils—an' cussed 'em, hot."

As though satisfied on this point, Dr. Eakins crossed over to the bedside, standing with hands folded as he gazed down upon the wounded man.

Bloodstains showed upon those coarse garments, all too large for the present wearer, since they had been fitted for the gaunt mountaineer.

His breath came with fair regularity, and there were tiny points of moisture upon his forehead where it was partially exposed through the long and still luxuriant locks of white hair being brushed aside.

After a few seconds thus Dr. Eakins stooped to gently touch an exposed wrist, watch coming out to aid in counting the pulse.

With strong emotion showing upon his face and in his dark eyes, Beautiful Jack watched through this painful pause, but as the physician put up his timepiece and took finger from wrist, he spoke in low, husky tones:

"Do your level best, doctor. Save his life—fetch him back again and I'll pay you anything you see fit to ask by way of reward! Only—save the poor old—save his life, I beg of you, sir!"

With a quick movement Ralph Eakins shook that touch off his arm, eyes fairly ablaze as they turned to more squarely cover this speaker. And his thin lips curled back from his strong teeth as he almost viciously spoke:

"There can be no bargain made between you and me, sir, until that other little account is fairly settled. And then—well, I hardly think you'll be capable of either promising or paying reward of merit!"

Turning away as though scorning to wait for retort or answer, Dr. Eakins stepped forth to where his well-trained horse was in waiting, accompanied by Harlow Crimmins, who apparently preferred outer air to that within his shack, just at present.

"I think Mrs. Dingle is signaling you, sir," coolly spoke the physician as he caught sight of the young widow over the way. "You needn't hurry back on our account, though. If I require any assistance, doubtless your friend in yonder—where did you pick him up, anyway?"

"Waal, doctor, he jest sort o'—sort o' happened 'long, an' that's a fact,"

hesitatingly answered the old hunter, nervously grinding away at his chunk of plug.

"Then he is a complete stranger to you? And he couldn't—could he have taken part or lot in this ugly work, think, Mr. Crimmins?"

"Him? Good Lawd—no!" fairly exploded the mountaineer. "Didn't he fetch the pore ole critter out o' the river? Didn't he jest—"

"All right. No harm done. The thought merely happened to strike me at the moment," suavely checked the doctor, taking medicine-case from where it was secured to the saddle, turning again to enter the cabin.

He caught sight of Beautiful Jack near the door, a half-smile upon that scarred face, and flushed a trifle. That was all, though. He entered the cabin, cool and composed, quietly saying:

"You know the old adage anent eavesdroppers, I fancy, sir?"

"Use your professional skill more and your tongue less, can't you, pardner?" drily questioned the Man from Gypsum in turn. "Afterward, if you really hone for the like, I'll measure up with you, in any way, shape or manner you prefer. For now—shall I coax you again, dear doctor?"

Ralph Eakins paid not the slightest attention to this thinly veiled hint and menace combined, but arranging his case to suit, turned back his cuffs like one preparing for sober business.

Yet he was not tongue-tied, either, as proved a bit later, when Reese Baker stirred and gave a husky moan under his practiced touch.

"Don't hurt him—more than you just have to," hoarsely muttered Jamison, his own face nearly as pale as that of the patient, and his powerful frame shaking like one caught by a sudden chill.

"Perhaps you would prefer taking full charge of the case, sir?" the doctor asked, coldly, but with a lurid glow in his big brown eyes.

"Of course, not, sir. I fetched you for that purpose. Only—"

"Then oblige me by not interfering. If you can't keep your lips closed, there's ample room on the outside."

"Go on. I'll keep quiet. I fancy you've got nerve enough not to mind one onlooker," quietly retorted the Double-Edged Sport, drawing back a bit from the bedside, to leave the professional more room.

"Thanks. You are complimentary, whether you meant it just that way or not. And in return, this flinching is not through actual pain, but because I touched certain nerves which—you see?"

Again that touch, and once again that moan and restless stir.

Then Dr. Eakins spoke further:

"Pity, too, that the poor fellow is so fully fevered. Only for that, he might be roused up sufficiently to tell his story and possibly brand the villains who treated him so shamefully. But now—well, while he might, and doubtless will, do some talking, little dependence can be put in the truth of his words, so spoken."

"You mean by that?"

"I mean that he is just as apt to fix upon the first person coming under his gaze as his murderer," quietly declared the physician, laying bare that bullet-cut breast with touch of professional. "And if that face should happen to belong to yourself, even—by the way, sir—"

An abrupt pause, those glittering eyes of velvet brown fixing keenly upon that curiously scarred visage the while. Then came the almost painfully distinct words:

"You can show a clean pair of hands in this case, sir?"

The Double-Edged Sport curled his lip in scorn, quietly speaking:

"Do your duty, sir. I'll answer that insult later on."

"A rare settling we'll have, don't you think?" mocked the man of medicine,

then turning again to his patient, coolly examining his hurts by sight and touch, never heeding those shivering starts, those husky moans of pain as he proceeded.

With sweat-damp brows Jack Jamison watched and listened, then as even his strong, bold heart turned sick within him, he was forced to move away, partly turning face from that pitiful sight.

Surely Dr. Eakins was using more roughness than was absolutely necessary? Was he taking his spite out upon this poor, helpless patient?

"Careful, there!" hoarsely warned the Man from Gypsum, over-shoulder. "Hurt my poor—old friend more than you just have to, and I'll—I'll shake the daylights clean out of you!"

As though the sound of that voice was all that lacked to break the spell which so far bound him, Reese Baker gave a husky cry, his heavy lids lifting, his face turning more toward yonder open door.

But the only face he saw was that of Dr. Eakins bending over him, and after a brief stare, he recoiled, that cry coming again, louder and harsher, yet filled with fright and fierce anger as well.

"Devil—you devil! I'll never—don't murder me! I can't—"

So much Jack made out, and with sudden fire he sprang to that bedside, one powerful arm pushing the physician aside as he did so.

"Who did it, daddy? Tell me who treated you so foully, daddy Baker?" the Double-Edged Sport urged, clearing his voice as much as might be.

"That devil—he did it!" gasped the miner, pointing toward Eakins.

CHAPTER XI.

A DEED OF DIABOLISM.

A preternatural power seemed loaned the terribly injured miner for the occasion, enabling him to rise partly up in bed, hand coming out with quivering forefinger pointing directly at the pale-faced physician.

That face was marked by a sneering smile rather than aught of fear when Jack turned his way, one hand seeking pistol-butt as its mate reached forth to—

Be struck down with revolver-barrel that same instant, then the muzzle rising swiftly to catch the drop with practiced skill.

"Careful, you brute!" cried the doctor in tones hardly above the normal, though his brown eyes caught a red tinge which savored far more of war than of peace. "This is hardly the time or place for settling private quarrels, but you can't shove me around like—"

There was a still hotter devil in those black eyes, while that diagonal scar looked nearly black in the dim light which reigned there in the mountain shack.

The Sport did not recoil from the death tube, nor did he make further attempt to grasp or to draw a weapon, speaking instead:

"You hear that? He says that you—"

"I told you in advance pretty much what might be expected," coldly interrupted the doctor, still on guard, though showing no further inclination for non-professional bloodletting. "Mine happened to be the first face which met his eyes, and so—that mad charge."

A charge which was not reiterated, possibly because the poor old miner had exhausted himself by that one frantic effort, sinking back in bed, gasping for breath, face even whiter than the slip upon which his head now rested.

"He *did* accuse you," harshly persisted the Man from Gypsum, betraying no personal fear, although none could know better than he how slight was his hold upon life so long as that black muzzle kept in line with his brain. "Is it true, then?"

"It is not true. Only an ass or idiot would begin to think that way. If true, would I be here, now?"

Without showing any fear of having

the tables turned upon himself, Dr. Eakins replaced his pistol, turning to Reese Baker once again the man of medicine rather than of war.

It was a magnificent bit of nerve on his part, and no man living could appreciate that better than John Jamison himself.

With that turning the wounded man shrunk and shivered, trying with too feeble strength to move away from that steady hand; but paying not the slightest heed to this plain repugnance, Dr. Eakins held the patient quiet with one firm hand, while with the other he deftly wiped away the few drops of fresh blood which exertion had caused to flow from the bullet-wounds.

"If you have any experience, sir, this ought to show you how slight chance there is of saving the man," he gravely spoke, showing no greater emotion than if this quivering body was nothing more than a cadaver prepared for dissection-table.

"While life lasts—"

"Of course. There is possibly one chance left in an even hundred," coldly interrupted the physician, again examining those hurts, heedless of the manner in which Reese Baker flinched and shrunk beneath his hands.

"He surely seems stronger than a while ago, though!" muttered Beautiful Jack, clinging to hope as one will even in the face of despair.

"Just as a candle brightens up for an instant when the wick sinks in the socket," gravely retorted the medical authority, never wasting so much as a glance at that anxious face close beside himself. "The final flicker, so to speak."

John Jamison caught his breath sharply as he gazed down on that prostrate shape, lying so helplessly beneath those white, firm, strong hands.

He could see where the cruel lead had cut its way so perilously nigh the throbbing heart, and ground his strong teeth as he thought how great a difference 'twould make if that single pellet had gone wider astray. And now—

"Save him, doctor," he muttered, huskily, fairly shivering with intense emotions. "Keep him alive until—save his life and I'll give you any reward you can ask in return!"

"Don't—I can't—he'll murder me like—oh,—"

Again that pitiful attempt to cheat the fate already recorded, but with calm power Dr. Eakins held the poor sufferer quiescent, never altering so much as a single muscle of his handsome face the while.

Of course it was but the fevered fancy of a terribly injured man. Of course there could be no actual grounds for thinking *this* man had aught to do with the foul outrage which—

Little as he liked him from first sight, Beautiful Jack could not put that abominable thought into clear words, even to himself.

"As I told you frankly, sir, there is barely the ghost of a chance for the poor fellow," repeated Dr. Eakins, flashing a brief look around at that sorely troubled face near his own shoulder. "And to do that—will you help me, first?"

"Tell me how—quickly?"

"All right. I need cold, fresh water for bandaging purposes. Find a bucket of some sort. The spring is—Mrs. Dingle, yonder, can show you where that is."

In that same swift glance Dr. Eakins caught sight of the young widow drawing near the door from without, led thither by her natural anxiety on behalf of the old man whom she had done so much to save from a speedier death.

He spoke without looking up or around, busying himself with the wounded miner once more, and Jack, his faint suspicions lulled to rest for the time being, thought only of obeying those crisp commands.

He saw a wooden pail resting upon a

stool in one corner of the room, and with a couple of swift, noiseless strides took possession of it, hurrying out at the open door, giving a low ejaculation as he nearly came into collision with Mrs. Dingle.

"The spring is—I'll show you, sir," Fanny said, quickly, turning and hurrying down the gentle slope with the Double-Edged Detective following close after.

With preternaturally acute senses Dr. Eakins knew just when Beautiful Jack sprung across the threshold, and at the same instant his unoccupied hand was opening his combined medicine and surgical-case now resting upon the lower portion of the bed.

With swift deftness a long, slightly curved bit of polished steel was singled out from the rest, and wasting barely time sufficient for one glance toward the open door, the physician snatched pillow from beneath his patient's head, holding it firmly over face and mouth, at the same instant slipping the steel into the bullet-hole so nearly over the doomed miner's heart!

One steady push, a cruel twist and turn—then the weapon was withdrawn, to be followed by a flow of fresh blood!

Reese Baker struggled to free himself, a smothered cry coming from beneath that firmly held pillow; but it was only a faint, brief struggle for life, and then those white teeth showed in a vicious smile, for Dr. Eakins knew that his deed of diabolism was complete!

He removed the pillow, though holding it in readiness to be as quickly replaced in case of need. No call for that, however!

Those widely distended eyes were catching the death-glaze. That shiver was the last touch of lingering life.

Swiftly as he had brought it forth, Ralph Eakins replaced that tool, taking instead a phial which would show better in the farce to follow this grim tragedy.

He slipped one hand under that poor head, raising the murdered miner up in bed, letting pillow fall back into place and denting it anew with deft touch of elbow; even such a seeming trifle was thought of in those supreme moments.

Then, while the ugly blood flowed from the wound so brutally tampered with, and like color began to mark those thin lips as lower jaw relaxed, the cold-blooded assassin lifted his voice to cry sharply:

"Help! Quick—help, here, I say!"

Already his acute sense of hearing warned him that hasty steps were drawing nigh to the front entrance, but he never looked that way for an instant, holding a pungent restorative close to the face of his murdered patient, seemingly intent on fighting against grim death itself.

This was the picture Beautiful Jack saw when he reached the doorstep, and after a brief recoil he dropped the pail of water, springing into the room and to the bedside, eager to lend what poor aid lay in his power.

What words passed his lips in those awful moments he never knew, and Dr. Eakins apparently paid them no heed. Naturally enough his sole care and thought was given this, his ill-fated patient.

"I fear it's too late for—but do what you can," he said, hurriedly, moving a bit as though to make room for an assistant. "Support him like—careful, man! Hold him so that—steady, now!"

The matchless villain worked even as a far better man might have labored in like circumstances, striving to fetch back the life which he had so brutally dismissed from this poor, marred casket.

That sharp appeal for aid had brought both father and daughter to the cabin, as well as hastened the return of Jamison, and now they watched, one cool, the other with eyes so dim through tears that she could see naught to avail.

Briskly Dr. Eakins worked, even after John felt that all labor was in vain.

In this, of course, he acted as any reputable physician would have done, thereby covering his evil tracks the more completely. For who could suspect such a man?

But all things must have an ending, and so with this grim farce.

Dr. Eakins gave over his efforts, laying aside the useless restoratives, bending lower until his face was nearly on a level with that of the poor unfortunate whom he had so deliberately done to death.

Still he did not speak in haste. Not until he had made all ordinary tests. And then, with a grave nod he relieved Jack of that burden, gently lowering head of corpse down upon the pillow which had played so important a part in that cold-blooded assassination.

"It is all over, I'm sorry to say," he spoke, tones even and betraying nothing more than professional regret at "losing a case."

"What brought it on so suddenly?" asked Jamison, huskily, his face betraying something of the intense emotions he was then feeling.

"So suddenly!" echoed Dr. Eakins, brows arching as he daintily dusted the tips of his fingers where they showed red with blood not yet dry. "Well, sir, I would scarcely term it just that, either."

"He seemed quite strong when I started for water."

"As I told you, sir," with a cold, steady gaze which certainly indicated little love for the Man from Gypsum. "A last, faint flicker. The poor fellow was moribund when I first saw him."

Jack shivered as a low sob came to his ears, and he saw Fanny Dingle hurriedly leave the death-cabin, apron rising to her tear-wet eyes.

Dr. Eakins looked to his case with professional coolness, replacing the various articles which had been disturbed; but that bit of steel which had done his evil work only too surely, was not brought to light just then nor just there!

The Double-Edged Sport stood for a few seconds gazing upon that face, so distorted with agony, so deeply lined with suffering. His breath came short and quick. His eyes glowed as though hidden fire dried up the tears which might have relieved his brain more quickly.

Then, with a sudden impulse he lifted his strong right hand, where the life-blood of the murdered miner showed redly, in oath of vengeance.

CHAPTER XII.

WHO AND WHAT IS THE DOUBLE-EDGED DETECTIVE?

His left hand gently touched that now motionless chest, and his dry, stern eyes were briefly lifted toward heaven as he spoke in low but almost painfully distinct tones:

"This poor old man has been foully done to death. I swear by all things good and holy; by my firm belief in a future; by my faith in an over-ruling Power; to never give over until those foul assassins have been discovered and brought to justice. So, help me God Almighty!"

Dr. Eakins ceased his operations and drew slightly back when the Man from Gypsum made his first impressive gesture.

A faint smile curled that moustached lip, and there was a half-mocking, half-menacing devil glittering in those big brown eyes as their owner listened to the blood-oath.

Still, he made no outward sign, wasted no word either of dissent or of approval when John Jamison ceased speaking.

Then, as though even yet he could not abandon all hope, Jack bent over the murdered miner, sinking to his knees and tenderly, lovingly making his examination.

In vain.

There was no pulse, no heart-throb, no breath to be detected, even by one

whose senses were quickened through—was it more than mere friendship, born of the fact that he had been partly instrumental in prolonging that life?"

Something of this wonder might have been detected in those brown eyes, had not their owner as quickly veiled them from observation when Beautiful Jack rose from his knees, turning that way.

"There is no longer hope. He is—dead!"

"If otherwise, would I have given over so soon?" coldly spoke the secret assassin, closing his medicine-case and shutting from view the instrument which had so surely obeyed his devilish will.

"I know, but if you knew—"

"You are some relation to Mr. Baker, then?" sharply asked the physician, closely scanning the face of this stranger who had so inconveniently forged to the front without the slightest warning.

Jamison must have heard, but he paid no heed. One hand was slipping into a deep pocket, to come forth with a lot of gold and paper, moving nearer the physician as the words were shaped:

"Pay yourself, please, Dr. Eakins. I haven't the least idea—"

Instead of complying, the doctor showed his teeth briefly, backing away as he curtly nodded his head.

"No, thanks. I could do the man no good, and I take no man's money in a case like this. Least of all—*yours*, sir!"

"I insist that you take—"

"And I even more positively refuse your gold, sir. There may be a debt between us—there *is* such a debt, in fact—but 'twill take a different metal from gold to pay off all scores."

There was no room left for doubting that thinly veiled meaning, and while he held no clew to the reason, Harlow Crimmins detected danger to one or both of these strong men.

"Not in hyar, ef at all, gents," he said, huskily, with a half-scared glance toward that corpse-laden bed. "I cain't hev no—understand?"

Dr. Eakins shook off that bony hand with a low, irritating laugh, moving toward the open door with medicine-case in hand as he spoke on:

"Don't you worry, old man. There'll be no further quarrel here so far as I am concerned, unless this—gentleman—jumps on my back without warning."

He stepped outside, turning when beside his horse, looking into the scarred face as Jack paused upon the doorstep.

"Paradise Park can boast no coroner, no sheriff, no law which interferes with the disposal of any corpse. Do what you deem best with the remains of Mr. Baker. And—if you wish—I'll send you out any aid or assistance from town which you may wish for."

"I ask no favors from you, sir, one way nor the other," retorted the Man from Gypsum, stung to the quick by that refusal to take the payment proffered. "I'll see you later, no doubt."

"You certainly shall, if my will has aught to do with it," declared Eakins, springing lightly into saddle.

"So be it, sir! I'll pay your bill whenever presented, in any sort of metal or mineral preferable to yourself. Until then—"

But Harlow Crimmins was far more placable, and cut in at that moment with a request that the doctor let the news be known in town, and to send out friends who would aid in caring for the dead man.

"All right, Mr. Crimmins," said the doctor as he turned his horse's head to ride away. "You're half-white, and I can serve you so far. Pity you don't choose better company to train with of late, though!"

With that parting fling he rode off at a brisk trot, finally disappearing over the crest beyond at a hand-gallop.

Not until the doctor was fairly out of sight did either of the men remaining take decided action; and then it was Jack Jamison who proposed removing the corpse from the cabin.

"Your daughter will hardly care to come back while the—while *it* is in yonder. And—there's the little captain, too; pity to break him in so early, isn't it?"

Those tones were gruff, those words sounding just a bit heartless, but none who would see his pale face then would have so far misunderstood the Man from Gypsum.

He was feeling that sad death very sorely for one who must have that day caught his first glimpse of Reese Baker. Or—was he such a complete stranger?

That doubt was what bothered Harlow Crimmins the most, just then, and after aiding Jamison in removing the body from cabin to a still ruder shed standing hard by, the old mountaineer essayed to settle his doubts, one way or the other.

Still, just then this stranger with the purple scar was hardly one whom a fairly modest man would care to bluntly charge with imposture. Whatever he might be under ordinary circumstances, just now the Man from Gypsum was darkly stern and forbidding in looks.

Naturally, then, the old hunter deemed it wisest to make his approach cautiously, and having settled in his mind the proper opening, he spoke:

"It's ruther rushin' things, mebbe, stranger, but—waal, thar was somethin' tuck place while you-all was done gwine fo' the doctor which—leastways I reckon—"

"What took place?" asked Jamison with a start and sudden flushing of face, eyes coming back to fix keenly upon that gaunt visage. "Do you mean that my—that *he* told who murdered him?"

"No, no; he never let on like he really knowed jest that," quickly assured the mountaineer. "Jest sort o' crazed on 'bout it's bein' them devils, or sech-like imps. But—thar *was* somethin', though. An' I—"

"Put it into plain words, please, Mr. Crimmins. Surely there need be no beating about the bush where you and I are concerned?"

"Waal, 'tain't so pesky easy, nuther! Fer one thing—ef a body knowed jest which an' who *you* be—thar, now!"

"You can call me Jack, or Jamison; either one will serve, sir."

"Then you hain't—*he* done he'd a boy he called Jack!"

"I know. I heard him say something about that. And he said, too, that his boy Jacky was dead," gravely spoke the Man from Gypsum.

"Then *you* hain't—"

"Listening? Yes I am, so please go on. Speak out plainly. Something happened during my absence, you say; what was it, please?"

"He wanted fer to cheat them devils, as he called it. Wanted to make a will; that's what he said. An' nothin' would do but what he hed to hev truck, fer writin' fetched him. An' I sort o' propped him up in bed. An' he—waal, *that's* what done tuck place, sir!"

"Mr. Baker made a will, you say? In whose favor, if I may ask?"

This promised to be another awkward snag, and it took some little engineering on part of Jamison to get the mountaineer safely past that second obstacle.

More than ever Harlow Crimmins felt assured that in this apparent stranger he really beheld the son and legal heir to Reese Baker.

If so, and his suspicions should be proven well-founded, how would Jack view that odd testament?

Would he laugh it to scorn and proceed to claim his legal rights, or would he—would he—

In spite of these awkward doubts, Harlow Crimmins was quickly driven into a corner from whence there was no escape save in telling the whole truth, which he reluctantly did at length, covertly watching that scarred face the while, taking note of each and every change written thereon.

The Double-Edged Sport Detective listened with varying emotions which he made little effort to disguise, speaking only now and then to force the old hunter to plainer speech, but at the end drawing a long breath of—was it relief, or less propitious emotion?

"Well, Mrs. Dingle fully deserves all that may come her way," the Man from Gypsum said, gravely, when Harlow Crimmins ceased speaking. "And I hardly think either of you need borrow trouble of another and better claimant coming to the front."

"Then you don't—his boy hain't livin', you reckon?"

"Why should I think any different, pray?"

Crimmins shifted uneasily on the log which served the two men for a seat just then. Should he put his full suspicions into plain speech?

"Waal, fer one thing, he done called *you*—he said *you* was his lost boy, Jacky!" desperately came the announcement.

Jack betrayed no emotion other than faint surprise, and after a brief pause he quietly spoke in turn:

"The poor old gentleman was out of his mind, and hardly knew just what he did say, I imagine."

"Then you hain't—*be* you Jacky Baker?" desperately.

"Would you rather I was that son, Mr. Crimmins?" and Jack smiled faintly as he asked this question, but the mountaineer felt in a far more serious mood, judging from his sorely perplexed countenance just then.

Then he made another reckless plunge into the cold waters, drawing that briefly worded will from bosom and handing it to Jack for perusal, muttering the while with a covert glance around them:

"Fanny'd hate me all over ef she was even to guess what I'm a-doin' of right now, sir, but—waal, you read, an' then I'll say the rest."

That reading seemed to be very difficult for the stranger, judging from the length of time he gazed upon the paper. His face slowly flushed, then faded out again. He started to refold the paper, but stopped to take a final look at the words there placed upon record.

"You see, sir, it's sort o' like this," slowly spoke Crimmins when assured that the stranger had fully mastered those lines of writing. "Fanny'd nigh snap my head off ef she even thunk I hed any idee of—but thar's the boy; smart as a steel-trap, an' pritty nigh as good as they make 'em, now-days—but he needs a *father* to look after him an' keep him g'wine the right trail. An' so—an' so—"

That silence awed the mountaineer, and his voice died away without completing the sentence begun.

Jack drew a long breath which almost seemed a sigh as he handed back that paper conveying so much rumored wealth. And after a brief silence he spoke, slowly, gravely:

"I wish I could even make it *seem* right, for such a glorious chance don't come in a man's way twice in an ordinary lifetime; but—I simply can't!"

"Then you hain't—you raally hain't—*him*?"

"No, worse luck! I'm merely John Jamison, often called Beautiful Jack, from Gypsum. Jacky Baker is dead and buried—forever! I wish I was *her* brother, even! I wish I might claim even that connection, for your daughter's sake!"

CHAPTER XIII.

BESIDE THE OPEN GRAVE.

The sunset glow had fairly faded out of the sky, and the twilight was rapidly deepening into night.

Keen though were the gray eyes owned by that old mountaineer, just now they served their owner badly. Or, was it merely fancy that this stranger grew so husky and unsteady of voice through hidden emotion?

Again the old suspicion came back, and Harlow Crimmins tried all he knew to read aright that scarred face; but the

deepening shades of an early evening baffled him.

If the Double-Edged Sport read those curious looks correctly, nothing in his face or his actions betokened as much. Instead of trying to avoid scrutiny, he appeared to invite it, since he took off his hat, lifting head and face as though feeling grateful to the cool night air which had recently breezed up.

Crimmins shifted his position uneasily, hardly knowing what to do or what to say next.

"Her brother?" he echoed, for lack of something better.

"Yes, her brother, for I reckon the little lady will feel the need of some such lawful backing, and that mighty soon."

"Then you really reckon—"

Jack flung forth a hand in passionate gesture, eyes turning again toward the rude shed beneath which now rested the bullet-marred corpse of poor Reese Baker.

"Can you ask, man? Think of all that—devils' work, sure enough! The black doing of demons who could have had but one end in view: to win the property which yonder poor old man held his own! And if so; if they could shoot him all to bits like that; how long would they hesitate before treating your daughter the same—or even worse?"

"I never—blame my ole hide ef—thunder!"

"It surely is just like that, Mr. Crimmins," declared the Double-Edged Sport, rising to his feet and giving his broad shoulders a shrug and a shake. "Reese Baker was murdered for his mine, and the little lady will have to fight hard for her rights if she's to hold fast her own. It's heavy odds; monstrous long odds; and she—a woman!"

Just then Willie Dingle came running up to say mamma wanted them to come in to supper, and both men seemed glad to have their consultation cut short.

Their talk was not resumed that evening, and the long night passed away without aught more being said anent the murdered miner or the will he had left behind him.

If there was less than usual slumbering beneath that humble roof on this night, no one remarked about it; but long ere day had fairly dawned, all save Willie Dingle were up and stirring.

Neither word nor aid had come from Paradise Park as yet, and even Harlow Crimmins began to doubt the promise given so readily by Dr. Ralph Eakins the evening before.

"Reckon maybe he done forgot it clean out o' mind," was his muttered apology to this guest with the scar. "Or, mebbe, the folks knowed we wouldn't be so apt fer to do ary much ontel this day come. An' so—you reckon, stranger?"

"Yes," said Jack, with a slight nod as the two men turned away from the mountain shack. "It's time we were at work. You have such tools as we'll need, Mr. Crimmins?"

"Thar's pick an' shovel an' sech-like; yes, sir."

"Fetch them, please. I saw a spot which—last night it struck me yonder was a suitable place for—you can come, after."

Apparently the Man from Gypsum found some slight difficulty in controlling his voice that morning. Words came reluctantly and none too clear. Possibly he had caught a slight cold during that lonely vigil beside yonder poor corpse.

The two men labored in unison after the spot for interment was decided upon, although Beautiful Jack did by far the greater portion of the excavating. Hard and rapid labor seemed to in some degree soothe his perturbed spirit.

Although the sun was hardly visible over the high grounds lying to the east, that grave was finished and the two men were resting beside it from their labors when the mountaineer gave a low exclamation, nodding head toward town as he muttered:

"Yender they come, now! Doc did tell 'em, fer all!"

In silence the Double-Edged Detective turned eyes in the direction indicated, at first only conscious of a goodly force coming their way, evidently from Paradise Park, no doubt urged on by curiosity such as could hardly fail to be awakened by an event of this description.

But then—

"Thar's Doc Eakins comin', too!" declared Crimmins, shading eyes with hand to win a clearer view. "I'd know him ef I was to see him with the two eyes o' me done shet up tight; yes, I would, now!"

Jack gave a slight start at this, looking more keenly himself, jaws squaring a bit more as he recognized not only Ralph Eakins riding at the head of yonder company, but Hugh Forepaugh close alongside the man of medicine.

To the best of his knowledge and belief Beautiful Jack had never met one nor the other prior to that encounter of the afternoon last spent, but he held precious scant faith in either of the worthies, and when fairly assured of their identity he strode quickly over to where lay his hat and belt, discarded while at work, putting them both on with swiftly working fingers.

There was no pretense at other sentiment than the one which led him to take such precautions, and both Eakins and Forepaugh slackened a bit in their coming.

Instead, one of the citizens who bore the twain company pushed to the front with uplifted hand, calling out in bluff, hearty tones:

"Flag of truce, stranger! There'll be no row unless you see fit to set it on foot. We're here to help bury an honest old man, and we come with the best of feeling toward all save the cursed whelps who played poor Baker all over dirt!"

"That's white, Abel Garrone," cried Harlow Crimmins, plainly relieved by this declaration of peace.

"It's meant for the pure quill, at any rate," declared the honest fellow as he came nearer. "We come in peace, and I trust we'll be received the same."

His gaze was fixed upon the stranger from Gypsum while lips shaped these words, and as Jack saw naught in face or actions of either Eakins or Forepaugh to contradict, he made equally frank reply:

"That means me, of course. I'll never start a row, willingly, sir, and least of all while my poor—while the poor old gentleman awaits his final planting. So—truce it is, and truce it shall be."

"That's hearty, and I'm proud to grasp the hand of—shake!" effusively cried Garrone, suiting action to words, giving that sun-embrowned hand a vigorous grip and shake.

"It's merely common decency, sir," gravely spoke the other, flashing a brief glance toward the gambler, whose face plainly showed the blow received the afternoon last past. "And now—what next?"

Abel Garrone likewise looked around, but his gaze was for the dead rather than for the living, and his words were cut to suit.

"The planting, I reckon. And since there's no relatives—"

"Who said so?"

"Why, I certainly thought—has he, then?" asked the surprised man.

Before more could be said, Dr. Eakins came forward, having dismounted and hitched his horse during that bit of by-play.

Jack, still in doubts as to just what motives might actuate this brown-eyed man of medicine, easily slipped right hand back to rest on hip, in close proximity to his forty-four. That alone betrayed his readiness for whatever might come, and if Ralph Eakins took note, he gave no outward sign of fear or of anger.

"If I may be excused for interrupting, gentlemen," he said, in cold yet smooth tones, "perhaps I can throw some faint light upon the subject."

"How so, doctor?" asked Garrone, curiously.

"You spoke of relatives, I believe?"

"Yes. I surely thought—had the old gentleman any such?"

"I think so, yes. At least he spoke of one; a son, if I caught his meaning aright yesterday. The poor fellow was feverish and almost at his last gasp, still I believe he knew what he was saying, so far."

"I fancy he knew far more than you saw fit to give him credit for, sir," grimly observed Jack, his black eyes glowing with poorly suppressed fire.

"Possibly; but your fancies worry me precious little, my dear sir," coolly retorted the man of medicine, then turning more squarely toward Abel Garrone while adding: "He said, too, that son was dead, so we might as well leave him out of our calculations. As for Baker, that's far different."

"He was a queer fish! I doubt if he could use up fingers of one hand in counting his friends—"

"You have said quite enough, Dr. Eakins. Best not say too much!"

"Reese Baker was short on friendship," persisted the doctor, paying no heed to that sharp interruption, "but, all the same, he ought to have a decent burial. And so, to boil it all down, just this much:

"I did all man could do to save his life, yesterday, but he was in a moribund condition when I first saw the poor old fellow. I don't owe him a penny, as the papers will show when—"

"What papers?" again interrupted the Double-Edged Sport.

"Never mind. Time enough for all that later on, after the dead has been decently cared for. And that just leaves—this much."

"I'll pay any and all charges. I'll stand good for everything, and for that reason I've had a coffin prepared and brought from town to—"

That hot and angry flush slowly faded from the scarred face, and now unusually pale, but with eyes that seemed backed by living fire, John Jamison stepped forward, his hand closing upon the doctor's arm with a vigor which cut short his glib speech.

"You have said enough—almost too much, Dr. Eakins. Don't say anything further along those lines unless—don't you do it, I say!"

"Sir! What am I to understand by such language?"

"That we neither ask nor will accept any assistance from you."

"But I insist, sir. I claim the privilege as a right which is my—"

"Wait, please," again interrupted the Double-Edged Sport, then turning toward the mountaineer to distinctly add: "Mr. Crimmins, may I call upon you for a word or two?"

"Good Lawd-ee!" fairly spluttered the old hunter, yet recoiling a bit as though far from assured that aid would be such as he could fully approve of. "Why wouldn't ye, then, sir?"

"Thanks. Please give me your attention, gentlemen all. And now—what was it Reese Baker called me, before I went for medical assistance, Mr. Crimmins?"

"His own boy Jack; jest that, ef I'm to die next minnit!" positively asserted the gaunt mountaineer, not a little relieved to find the test so much less difficult than he had at first feared.

A stir and a muttering ran through the circle of witnesses, but Beautiful Jack paid them no attention, speaking on in clear, grave tones:

"Was he fully aware of what he said, do you think? Was he sensible, or could he have been wandering in his wits, when he so called me?"

"Just as sensible as you or I be right now; yes, sir!"

"Enough! There you have my claims, gentlemen," added Jamison, turning for a swift glance over those deeply interested faces. "As the dead man's son, who can have a better right to perform the last duty which—"

"Then you declare yourself the son of Reese Baker?" almost sharply demanded Dr. Eakins, again coming to the front.

CHAPTER XIV.

BURYING THEIR DEAD.

Something in tone or manner seemed to forebode trouble, and thinking that way, honest Abel Garrone would have interposed if permitted.

He did begin a hasty protest, but with a sweep of his strong right arm Dr. Eakins forced the citizen back, himself squarely facing the man who had made such an amazing announcement but a few moments before.

A half-smile showed upon that scarred visage, but Beautiful Jack seemed in no particular haste to give the assurance needed.

Seeing this, Ralph Eakins spoke again:

"You positively assert that you are the son of yonder dead man, then?"

"Yes. And yonder lies all that is left me of—of my poor old father, murdered by—"

"By whom?" almost fiercely demanded the physician, as the Double-Edged Sport faltered in his speech once again. "Whom do you accuse of killing Reese Baker, sir?"

Beautiful Jack brushed a hand swiftly over his eyes, then gave his head a defiant shake, speaking in steadier, clearer tones:

"Who did this foul deed, do you ask, sir? *My game*, if it takes the rest of a lifetime to fairly entrap it!"

"Good luck help you to that same finding, sir!" fervently cried Abel Garrone, his honest face flushed with interest. "And if we can do anything to help that same ending, here's one who'll never wait for a second calling; that's flat and solid!"

Jack bowed his head a bit in token of gratitude, but then spoke on, deeming it wisest to clinch his claims now they had been fairly made in public.

"If there are any explanations required, that can come up later on. For just now, this is the main point.

"I was that poor old man's only child; besides myself he had not a single blood-relative on the face of this wide world. Maybe I've not proved myself the best and most dutiful of sons, but this much I do claim and will maintain; it's my sad duty to care for all that now remains of my poor old daddy. I ask favors of no man alive this day, and least of all will I accept any such from the man whom I had to force at pistol-muzzle to at least attempt his sworn duty to the dying; *you*, Dr. Ralph Eakins!"

"This appears to be your innings, Mr. ah—your name is—what?" asked the man of medicine with an insolent drawl in his tones, as he looked at the Double-Edged Sport through half-closed lids.

"Call me Get-there if you prefer, for that is just what I've taken solemn oath to do," coolly retorted Jack; then adding in less defiant tones: "But now I am ready to pay double price for what I can't fetch myself to accept as a gift."

Walking over to where the rude coffin had been deposited, Beautiful Jack looked at it for a few seconds in silence, then placed a number of gold coins upon a flat rock close by in payment, after which he stooped to pick up the stained box and carry it over to the shed beneath which still rested the corpse of the foully murdered miner.

Harlow Crimmins and Abel Garrone assisted the self-admitted son in preparing his dead for the grave. Dr. Eakins and Hugh Forepaugh drawing a little apart, conversing in low and guarded whispers the while.

After so much time lost Jack seemed to think it best to hasten matters as far as might be done without actual disrespect for the dead.

His face showed unusually pale, his jaws were firmly set, his black eyes looked gloomy and stern; but there certainly was little outward show of filial grief, judging from the conventional standpoint.

"It's a dead bluff he's trying to give us!" muttered Hugh Forepaugh as he stood by taking notes. "Son? Son nothing! Augh!"

"The claim is mighty nigh as bad for us—and monstrous little better for himself, too!" decided Dr. Eakins, in like tones.

The Double-Edged Detective apparently paid no attention to either of the two men whose undying enmity he had incurred the day last past. Possibly he forgot them entirely in those sad minutes. Grief may have left no room for revengeful thoughts. Or, again, he may have felt assured that he had no cause for fearing fresh trouble from either so long as a number of witnesses were present.

Clad once more in the garments which he had worn when he went to his sad death, Reese Baker was placed in the rude casket. The lid was put in place and firmly secured. The coffin was borne to the grave already prepared for its reception, and slowly, carefully lowered by means of the very rope which had played so prominent a part in aiding the poor old man up from the foam-flecked river.

When this was done, Mrs. Dingle, holding averted Willie by a hand, her face unusually pale and marked by recent tears, came silently up to the grave, standing at its foot, while Beautiful Jack faced her at the head of their dead.

No minister of the gospel was present, for Paradise Park was unable to boast of such an acquisition.

No one offered to fill that important position, and those who so silently gathered about the grave, seemed to feel the awkwardness of the situation.

Covert glances were interchanged, and each face showed embarrassment far beyond the ordinary.

Of all those within eye-range, only one man showed aught of heartlessness, just then. Even Hugh Forepaugh had bent his head slightly, removing hat to partially conceal his face while waiting there.

Not so Ralph Eakins. His tall, athletic figure was drawn erect, his chest well out, his head flung back, a cold, sneering smile curling his mustached lip after anything but a Christian fashion.

If those who held no especial interest in the matter felt so deep an embarrassment, what must it have been for a son? But if John Jamison felt aught more than those around him, nothing of the fact showed in his stern, scarred face just then.

Then, without word or warning, his head went back until his face was turned partially toward heaven, lids closing as his lips parted to pronounce, from memory, the ever-impressive burial service.

Here and there that strong, deep-toned voice faltered or grew husky, and once came a break as though memory proved treacherous all of a sudden, yet never before had those rude, armed men listened to a more impressive service than this.

That deep-pitched voice faltered and fell almost to a whisper with the concluding words. That proud head sunk until chin touched chest. A bright tear crept forth from beneath those closed lids; but ere they could fall or were fairly noticed by others, Beautiful Jack rallied, giving head an almost savage toss, dashing hand over his eyes to clear his vision and obliterate all tokens of such unmanly weakness.

Then, as though she feared to wait longer lest worse might happen, Fanny Dingle began to sing, her voice weak and tremulous at first, yet sounding all the sweeter as the words of that grand old hymn crossed her quivering lips.

A brief pause, then Beautiful Jack caught up the air, followed by others in turn, until fully one-half of that congregation were lending voice to the Rock of Ages.

A brief pause followed the final line, broken by Beautiful Jack, who sunk to his knees at the head of that as yet open grave, bowing head and clasping hands.

Not a sound passed his lips, yet one and all knew the self-claimed son was engaged in prayer for the dead.

Another pause, then John Jamison passed over to where Mrs. Dingle stood, grasping her hand between both of his, pressing it warmly. Tears showed back of his dark eyes as he spoke in husky tones:

"I thank you—for *his* dear sake! I thank you, for—for poor old daddy Baker, Mrs. Dingle."

Fanny made no answer. She could not, then. Hot tears rushed to her aching eyes, and as her trembling hand was set free, she turned and hurried away, wondering Willie toddling along by her side.

Jack watched mother and child for a few seconds, then turned again to the duty which was as yet incomplete. Grasping shovel with one hand, he lifted his other to command attention, speaking gravely and briefly:

"I thank you one and all, gentlemen, for assisting in burying our dead. Words are mighty poor pay, but they are all I dare to offer you, now, but—"

"Lord love ye, mate; we don't need arny pay fer this; we're glad to help ye bury—durn me fer a slip-tongue fool, now!"

A few of the more hardened smiled a bit at that awkward slip of the tongue, but only Dr. Eakins gave laugh outright.

Jack flashed a keen glance that way, as though to record an additional insult, but merely spoke on:

"We'll settle all the rest of it later on, my good friends. Will you kindly wait until—until I'm through?"

Without pausing for an answer, he drove shovel into the damp clay, working with grim vigor until his grewsome task was completed; until the grave was filled and its top neatly rounded over.

Then Jamison cast shovel aside, removing hat to wipe his sweat-damp brow, slowly, keenly gazing around upon the still waiting citizens.

He had certain things to put into words, and he felt that he would make a better showing if he could have time and privacy in which to put his meaning in shape; but that was denied him, and so he made the best of the case.

"It's a long and none too easy story to tell, gentlemen," he began, face grave and voice impressive beyond the ordinary. "Some day you may hear the whole of it, but for now—let this suffice:

"My real name is John Baker, and Reese Baker is—*was* my father. We quarreled; both were to blame, I dare say, but I then thought father was wholly in the wrong. So—I left him, staying away for years, only returning at last to—find this!" with hand indicating the grave.

"Poor daddy! Even while I was feeling hard and revengeful toward him, he was thinking of me, working for me, ever holding faith that his 'Jacky boy' would come back in good time to—let that pass. I can't talk as I would like, gentlemen, but I'll say—enough for the present.

"Before he really recognized me as his long-absent son, then, the poor old man made a will, while in full and perfect possession of his senses, bequeathing the mine he had worked for so long a time, together with all other real or personal property of which he might die possessed, to one who bravely risked life in order to save his: who *did* keep him from drowning in yonder treacherous little river!"

"That person was one whom I fancy you all know, and to know is to respect: Mrs. Fanny Dingle, daughter of Harlow Crimmins."

This announcement caused a sensation, but, while many low words and exclamations passed between the witnesses, no one spoke openly, until Dr. Eakins saw fit to move a bit nearer the front, coldly asking:

"And *you*, sir? Surely you, as his acknowledged son, ought to come in for at least a—father's parting blessing!"

There was a thinly disguised sneer underlying this speech, which brought a hot flush to those cheeks; but Beautiful Jack

had set a mark for himself, and while that was yet unattained he could hardly afford to engage in quarrel, verbal or physical.

"I am just coming to that, sir, or, rather, *you*, gentlemen," he said, with forced calmness. "Daddy Baker added a codicil to that will, through which his son was to inherit a fair share of all property, in case he should come back alive inside of one year from yesterday.

"If his son failed to appear and claim his share, then all was to revert to Mrs. Fanny Dingle. And now—listen, gentlemen, all!

"*She* richly deserves it all. I can shift for myself. It shall be as though John Baker was dead and buried, unless—"

CHAPTER XV. CONFLICTING CLAIMS.

That pause was purely voluntary on the part of Beautiful Jack, for his audience seemed perfectly willing to hear all he might have to say upon the subject before airing their own views.

One swift, keen glance around, his eyes lingering a bit longer upon Dr. Eakins and his present companion than any other persons, perhaps, then the Double-Edged Sport spoke on.

"Unless I have to claim my legal rights as the surest if not the only method of foiling the devils in human shape who so foully assassinated this poor old man, now lying in his humble grave."

Again Beautiful Jack paused, one hand lifted, as though to record a solemn oath, the other pointing downward at the mound of fresh earth at his feet.

A brief period of silence, broken by Ralph Eakins, who stepped a bit forward, coldly asking:

"Pray, when was that will made and signed, sir?"

"Shortly before its maker's death. While I was away in quest of medical assistance," quickly replied the Man from Gypsum. "You have been told as much already, gentlemen. And told that Reese Baker was in full possession of his senses as well, so that—"

"Another moment, please," interrupted the physician, hand lifting to back the protest. "Did Reese Baker mention that mine in his will?"

"Mentioned it particularly, yes, sir."

"He did? Then that will is not worth the paper it was written upon," distinctly declared Dr. Eakins.

Another sensation for the audience, and for a brief space those composing it pushed here and there, each unit talking rather than listening.

Harlow Crimmins' jaw dropped perceptibly, staring half-dazedly at the bold speaker, who had so ruthlessly upset the air-castle he had been building through those hours since the passing of Reese Baker.

Beautiful Jack himself was taken somewhat aback by that blunt, contemptuous sentence, but he rallied quickly, his face flushing a bit as he took a step that way, speaking sternly:

"Not worth the paper it's written on? What do you mean by that?"

"Precisely what I say: that the supposed will and testament is utterly null and void, so far as that particular bit of property is concerned," coolly asserted the physician, his brown eyes glittering as though their owner actually enjoyed this bit of revenge.

"By saying which you mean to infer—just what?"

"Nothing more than I am amply able to back up with the papers, all in due shape and form."

"Papers? Of what nature, pray?"

"Well, for one thing, what's the matter with a bill of sale?"

"What! Do you mean to say that—show your papers, sir! You've got to do just that, now, or else admit yourself a liar and your claim a glaring fraud! Show your papers, I say, Dr. Ralph Eakins!"

Beautiful Jack was excited far beyond the ordinary for one who as a rule carried a cool and clear head upon his shoul-

ders; but he had lost sleep and undergone much sore anxiety of late, so he was not wholly without excuse for the unusual weakness.

On the other hand, Dr. Eakins never seemed cooler, more wholly master of himself and his passions than right now. His strong white teeth showed a bit through his carefully kept mustache, and there lurked a malicious devil in his velvety brown eyes, as they rested upon that purpling scar.

"Don't worry yourself about the documents, my very dear sir," he retorted a moment later. "They shall be open for inspection at the proper time and place. But you are laboring under a slight mistake: I never claimed to hold those papers in my own right."

"What?"

"Just that. The documents exist. I know, for I signed them as witness, requested to do so by—Reese Baker as well as the present owner of that much-talked-of mine, who is—at your service, gentlemen!"

With a low, mocking laugh, Dr. Eakins gave his comrade a slight push toward the front, and, doffing his hat as though in deference, Hugh Forepaugh spoke for himself.

"It needn't take long, gentlemen, for it's a mighty short deal. I hold a regular bill of sale for that mining property, made out in due form, signed, and witnessed. All those who can show the right to make any such claim, can see the document and satisfy themselves."

"A bill of sale, you say?" asked Beautiful Jack, now again cool and composed, so far as outward semblance went. "For what figures, pray?"

"For value received," curtly retorted the knight of the green-cloth, evidently taking his cue from his friend, the doctor. "The paper speaks for itself, or will do so at the proper time and place. For now, this is the way the cards run:

"I'm giving one and all full and fair warning. I'm naming my legal rights, and simply stating that I mean to hold my own against the field."

For all he tried to speak with dignity, there was a bit of bluff, a bit of defiance in both words and tone, as the gambler made his statement.

Still, for the most part, those who figured mainly as witnesses in this queer scene were fairly convinced that Forepaugh and his comrade held the key to the situation, bluster or no bluster, while poor Harlow Crimmins looked the very picture of blighted hopes and frosted ambition.

Not so the Double-Edged Sport, who never looked more confident, never felt more defiant than when his hopes seemed destroyed.

Boldly facing the men who made this unexpected claim, he spoke in his turn:

"I flatly dispute your claim and assumed right, sir. By virtue of the last will and testament, made in due form by Reese Baker—"

"Touch lightly, my gentle stranger. By your own admission that same will and testament was made yesterday. Am I right, neighbors?"

"That's what he said, easy enough, Doc."

"Thanks," with a curt nod toward the citizen who volunteered the affirmation. "Made only yesterday, while the bill of sale to which I appended my signature as witness was made out and conveyed to the present owner of that claim—just four days ago!"

"Or—forged," distinctly amended Beautiful Jack.

"What!" fiercely ejaculated the physician, his face turning very pale, but his eyes catching a red signal of danger. "Do you dare to even insinuate that I would—"

The Double-Edged Sport flung up an open hand; but it was his left, while the other good member gripped the butt of his forty-four, ready to forestall any more warlike attempt on the part of his present adversaries.

"Keep your linen on, doctor. There's

nobody going to climb up your back as long as you don't beg them to play circus."

"You dared to insinuate—"

"What I may see fit to put into still plainer speech ere the end of this little affair be reached," coolly interjected the Double-Edged Sport, evidently caring but little how deeply he rubbed the insult in.

Hugh Forepaugh just now showed greater coolness than his friend and witness could boast, for he caught an arm and held Dr. Eakins in restraint, whispering a few hasty words the while.

Beautiful Jack saw as much, and his lip curled a bit. He had hardly looked for an open attack from either of these men, and that action told how nearly right had been his expectation.

Then, too, others rallied sufficiently to interpose on behalf of peace, if not of good will, among them Harlow Crimmins and Abel Garrone.

Jack listened to their friendly expostulations, but through it all he never for an instant lost sight of yonder brace of enemies: for such he knew them to be, past all doubt.

Even if nothing more had turned up to cause trouble than that little encounter in Paradise Park the day before, 'twould have been more than sufficient to ensure a feud. But now—there could hardly be other ending than bloodshed.

The Man from Gypsum held himself in readiness to promptly meet, if not actually anticipate, any dangerous move which might be made by Dr. Eakins or Hugh Forepaugh; but the proper moment for such decisive action had not yet arrived, in their estimation.

Jack saw as much when a full minute had passed them by without blow or shot, and then he pushed his own friends aside, clearing a space in front, his eyes fixed upon the pale face of Ralph Eakins as he spoke again.

"You fellows claim to have given full and fair warning; now listen to mine, just for a change."

"I claim my rights as son and heir to the man whom you have just assisted me in burying, gentlemen. As such, I feel that I have a double duty: to hold the property he died possessed of, and to avenge his cruel murder."

"In doing the last, all law-abiding citizens will back you up," the physician declared, coldly. "I myself will go as far as even *you* dare lead the way. But when you make such absurd claims—"

"What I make I mean to uphold. What I say I intend backing up to the very last gasp," sternly vowed the Sport.

"Your claims, so far as that mine goes, aren't worth the empty wind it takes to put them into words," sharply averred the gambler.

"That is what you say, but I hardly think it's just what you believe," retorted Beautiful Jack, with ready tongue. "If you do feel that way, let me give you a little pointer, just for luck."

"I make those claims, and I intend to make them good so long as the breath of life lingers in this ugly shell of mine. If you were ten thousand, each unit a mighty chief with unbroken record, I'd say the same thing: I'm in this fight to win!"

"Do you imagine we are in it merely for our health?" sneeringly asked Dr. Eakins.

"That's all right, too, if you can only make it appear so. I'd heapsight rather you'd come out in the open than to fight under cover. For that little bit I'm giving you thanks. Now—listen, please."

"I am John Baker. The poor old man we have this morning laid to rest was in life my father. Maybe I might have been a better son. Maybe I ought to have acted different while poor daddy was alive. But all that is no concern of yours, and lies between my dead father and myself."

"What I meant to say comes to just this: Being the one blood relative Reese Baker left behind him, I mean to defend his rights, and to hold the property he died possessed of."

"That leaves out the mine you've spoken of, then," cut in the gambler, sharply. "That had passed from the old man's possession long before he hopped the twig, as I've the documents to prove!"

"So you say, but I'm not admitting your claim," retorted the Man from Gypsum. "I deny the sale. I stand in your path, if you mean to make any effort toward taking possession of that property."

"Which I certainly shall do."

"Not with my consent, at any rate. And there's only one way in which you can get me out of your way: to murder me, just as—somebody—murdered my poor old daddy!"

There was a thinly veiled charge underlying the final sentence, and both Eakins and Forepaugh recognized as much. Under ordinary circumstances, such an insinuation would have meant powder-burning, but now matters were different.

The two comrades put their heads together for a brief space, then the gambler turned toward Jack, speaking sternly:

"Your vile hints are wholly beneath our notice, sir. When you are man enough to make an open charge, I'll answer you in due form. Until then, just bear this in mind, will you?"

"Keep off of my property, no matter where it lies, or of what it may consist. If caught trespassing, you shall be treated accordingly. Come, doctor, we might as well be moving, don't you reckon?"

CHAPTER XVI.

THE ENEMY IN POSSESSION.

Possibly feeling that a retreat would come with better grace right after delivering a combined defiance and warning of this sort, Hugh Forepaugh slipped a hand through an arm of his chum, turning sharply away, without giving their adversary chance to make retort, even granting that such would be his desire.

The Double-Edged Sport made no attempt to check that retreat, nor did he call after them, as he may have felt tempted to do.

For one thing, he never felt less inclined to press a war of words than right at that time, following so closely upon the burial of the poor old mine-owner.

Take it all in all, those recent hours had been full of trouble and mental torment for this rugged adventurer; and strong though he certainly was, John Jamison—to stick to the name he had at first claimed—began to show the strain.

More than one of the citizens could fairly well realize all this, and, while their curiosity seemed whetted rather than satiated by all they had seen and heard, be it said to their credit that not one among all who lingered there near the newly-made grave pressed Jack with idle query or hinted wonder.

A few followed after Dr. Eakins and Hugh Forepaugh, both of whom took saddle and rode leisurely away in the direction of Paradise Park, just as though they held no further interest in the affair.

For the most part, however, the citizens lingered, some through morbid curiosity, others thinking to give aid or comfort when the chance should occur.

Among the latter may be mentioned Abel Garrone, a rough-looking, blunt-speaking man of something past middle age, yet who was a far better man than many two-thirds his years, physically speaking. Morally, there was never a citizen in Paradise Park who stood higher in general estimation than this same Abel Garrone.

Watching his two now avowed antagonists until they crossed the gentle rise, Jack turned to smooth that fresh mound a bit more neatly, his face paler than usual, and seeming a bit haggard.

Harlow Crimmins showed far stronger anxiety now than did the Man from Gypsum, although he was beginning to rally from the heavy blow dealt his new-

ly born hopes of wealth and comfort for his old age.

He fidgeted about, plainly desirous of speaking to Jamison, yet held back by a sort of half awe, such as no other mortal had inspired in the rough old hunter.

Presently, however, Jack noticed something of this, and, as their eyes met squarely, Crimmins made a slight sign which drew the other after him a bit later.

Not until they were fairly apart from all others, and where there was no danger of his words reaching unwelcome ears, did the mountaineer venture to speak a portion of his troubled thoughts.

"Be ye really g'wine to fight them two critters for the rights ye ought to hev as—as *his* boy, Jack?"

"I surely am," quietly answered Jamison. "Why?"

"Waal, thar's heap sight which—it's a nasty mixed up mess all over!" fairly exploded the hunter, with vigorous gesture.

"And one that I'll devote the rest of my life to clearing up," declared Jack, his eyes glowing afresh. "If for no other reason, poor old Daddy couldn't rest quiet in his grave while his foul assassins curse the world with their living!"

Harlow Crimmins flashed a half-frightened look around them, then moved a bit nearer the stranger, to whisper in husky tones:

"Then you r'ally be—you wasn't jest bluffin' them critters?"

"In what manner, pray, Mr. Crimmins?"

"I mean—you said, a bit afore, that you wasn't—"

"Never mind what I may have said then," soberly interposed Jack. "I had fair reasons for all I've said or done since first finding my—Reese Baker, in deadly peril over yonder. As for the rest of it: yes! I mean to fight for the rights I claim, and to win or die!"

"Is that plain enough for you, old friend?"

Harlow Crimmins drew a long breath, then spoke again:

"It's jest what I might 'a' knowed from the very looks o' ye, sir. It's what I *did* know, too! An' so—ye want to git a hump on, then!"

"Why so?"

"Or Doc an' that 'ar card-sharp'll block ye clean off, to a dead moral! They rid off turrible easy like, an' played keerless all over; but ef I was to be put onto my Bible say-so this holy minnit, it'd come pritty much like this:

"Git thar in a hurry, or you'll git left—bad!"

That warning might have been couched in plainer terms, but Jack was quick to catch a hint, let it come in what shape it might.

"You're right, pardner," he said, giving his head and shoulders a quick shake like one flinging off heavier cares for the time being. "I'll go take charge, lest those fellows get in ahead of us. That would give us the hot end of the poker to play with, for a fact!"

"I'll make it right with some o' the men, fust, an' then—"

"That's my part, please," interposed the Double-Edged Sport Detective, turning and drawing nearer the citizens, who looked his way with undisguised curiosity.

"You've heard all that passed here, gentlemen, and can give a pretty fair guess at the rest of the case," he said, without delay or further preface. "I claim possession of all property left by Reese Baker, as his son and legal heir. Others claim the same property, and mean to make all the trouble they know how."

"Now, I can fight my own battles, against one man or a dozen. I'm not begging your help for aught like that. But I *do* ask this much: your company as far as the hut and mine belonging to the poor old man we've so lately buried."

"I'm going there to take possession, if the enemy has not forestalled me, to make my claim, if they are already in

possession. I want good men as witnesses to one or other. Will you go that far with me, friends?"

There was not a dissenting voice, though a few of the citizens kept silence, covertly glancing at one another.

Content with so much, Jack nodded to Harlow Crimmins, then struck briskly off in the direction of the dead man's mine.

Few words were spoken by the way, and nothing occurred to interrupt their journey, either for good or for ill, and in due course of time the little company came in sight of the shanty, whose roof and walls of combined sticks and stones and clay mortar had for so long sheltered ill-fated Reese Baker.

At first glance the cabin seemed wholly deserted, for no living object was stirring near; but Jack was hardly a man to take aught for granted when waiting might serve far better, and called a halt.

"There's both a wrong way and a right way, friends. We're not here to mix in a row, if it can just as readily be avoided. So—give me that gun of yours, please, Mr. Crimmins."

As he spoke, Jamison took possession of the Winchester rifle, which rarely left its owner's hand while abroad, then, coolly seating himself upon a convenient boulder, he added:

"Go ahead, please. I'll hold things level from right here. Talk soft if anybody bars the way, for it isn't fighting, first-off, remember."

This cool action and cooler speech caused some little surprise, and possibly more than one lip caught a curl of half-scorn, as the owner took this to be a bit of the white feather.

Harlow Crimmins new better, though, and Beautiful Jack cared very little. He had his own reasons for acting after this fashion.

"All right. I'll do the talkin' ef thar's ary sech to be did," the old hunter declared, moving forward. "'Pears like thar wasn't—an' right hyar's one which hopes she hain't—too!"

But that hope was destined to be nipped in the bud very quickly.

The delegation was yet several rods from the front of the cabin, when the slab door swung open, to close behind a rough-clad, bearded man, who lifted a hand in swift warning, even before his voice was heard.

"Stiddy, thar, gents! You're heap goodlookin', take ye by-and-large, but you cain't come in; no, ye cain't, now!"

Harlow Crimmins stopped short, with a smothered curse, as this living barrier came in view; but Abel Garrone boldly spoke up for the party.

"Steady on your side, Dick Perkins. We've come here to—"

"That's all right, pardner, but it don't go down now nur hyar," doggedly declared the cabin guardian. "I'm put hyar to hold this yer fine shack fer its lawful owner, which is—"

"Old man Baker's own son, an' right yander he squats, now!" harshly cut in Harlow, Crimmins, pushing to the front once more. "He owns this cabin an' the mine an' all which—"

"Not the way *my* 'structions read, an' they're what I'm g'wine by, ye want to keep in mind," bluntly interrupted Perkins. "You cain't come in hyar, an' ef ye was to try it on—better don't, now!"

As he spoke thus, a slight sound from inside the cabin drew all eyes that way, and through closed window those nearest caught sight of the fairly handsome face of Hugh Forepaugh, the gambler, who claimed the mine in dispute.

Harlow Crimmins gave a half-smothered oath at this, recoiling a bit, like one baffled, in fact. And then, with a deft movement, Dick Perkins pushed the door far enough ajar to slip inside, the next moment showing at the window with ready Winchester.

From his outlook on yonder boulder Beautiful Jack saw what was going on, and now he gave a sharp whistle, by way of recall.

None of the party cared to go to extremities, but Crimmins would not beat

a retreat until he bluntly warned those inside the cabin that they would return, prepared to take full possession, in due form.

"An' ef thar's ary killin' g'wine on in consequence, hyar's as knows who's g'wine to leak the red paint: now you hear me sing, critters!"

A mocking laugh was the only answer vouchsafed, and then the little company turned in quiet retreat.

The Double-Edged Sport received them calmly, naught in his face or voice betraying regret or chagrin. Instead, he seemed grateful to them all for the consideration they had shown his wishes.

"It's hardly more than I anticipated," he added, as he led the way until that cabin was lost to view by a shoulder of rocks. "I mainly desired to learn just how far the enemy had ventured. I know now."

"An' shorely you won't take water now?" demanded Crimmins.

"There's time enough to settle just what manner of action I ought to take. Of course, I'll take *some* action: that goes without saying. I promised to hold the property left by my murdered father, and I'll do that or lose my life trying.

"But all that can be settled later on. I'll not ask any stranger to take part or lot in my private quarrel, though, until I can convince them that mine is the right end of the fight. So—until then, gentlemen, all—I thank you, most heartily and sincerely."

One by one Jack took hand with cordial pressure, and his cause lost nothing through his acting with such quiet dignity.

Then, promising to see them later on, Jamison bowed again, slowly moving away, in company with Harlow Crimmins alone.

The old hunter looked fairly disgusted with life, and far different from what he had when, such a comparatively short time gone by, he firmly believed that fortune was coming their way at last, "in great gobs," as he himself might have expressed it.

He muttered something about the entrance to the mine itself, but Beautiful Jack quickly negatived the idea.

"If they held the cabin, be sure they've secured the rest. No, we'll get there in the end, my good friend, but for now—it's wait a bit!"

The two men passed on, seemingly at random, pausing only when fairly upon one high and rocky bank of the river. Then Jack started to speak, only to break off with a stifled cry, as he reeled, to fall all in a heap, while a sharp crack came floating on the still air!

CHAPTER XVII.

SHOTS FOR A SHOT.

Harlow Crimmins recoiled with a sharp cry, for a bare instant at a loss to know just what that sudden stagger and fall really meant.

The treacherous lead sped more swiftly than the spiteful report of gun or pistol, and Jack was falling ere that tell-tale sound came to their ears.

The keen-eyed old hunter caught a glimpse of blood upon that scarred face, as its owner dropped to earth, and thoughts of another foul murder assailed him as swiftly.

Ere he could take action, however, the Double-Edged Sport whirled quickly over and around, head toward the river, and Winchester rifle coming into action on the instant.

Even as he reeled away from that stinging touch of bullet, Beautiful Jack located the hidden marksman, and now, swiftly as practiced hand could work the lever and trigger, he poured shots into yonder bit of cover, marked by a tiny cloud of gray vapor rising upon the still air.

With all that haste, the Double-Edged Sport was not shooting at random. The bit of smoke told him clearly enough whence sped that murderously intended shot, but the patch of shrubbery was too

dense for eye to penetrate at that distance, and large enough to afford cover for half a dozen enemies, should such see fit to take ambuscade right there.

And so the Man from Gypsum shifted aim slightly at each shot, now low, now high, now to right, and then to left, until the patch of cover was fairly raked from end to end by life-seeking lead.

Not another sound nor the slightest stir came from yonder ambush, so far as could be told from the other side of the brawling stream; but he who was so swiftly returning shots for shot never ceased firing until that magazine was empty and its mechanism refused to further obey his fierce will.

Not until then was word spoken or sound uttered by the Double-Edged Sport, but now he sprang to his feet, eyes still fixed upon yonder covert, as he thrust the repeater toward its rightful owner, saying:

"Feed her up, pardner! Sorry for using your good cartridges, but maybe I haven't entirely wasted them. If that cur—"

"Who was it? Which—Lawd-ee! ef you hain't got it plum' in the jaw of ye, then!" fairly exploded the mountaineer, wide-eyed and full of excitement.

"Bah!" cried Beautiful Jack, as he brushed hand over cheek, where that foul shot had caused a livid welt to rise, although the skin was but fairly broken. "The cur pulled off his aim a bit. And that is—fodder the old girl up, Crimmins. Those shots caught other ears than ours, I reckon."

"It's the boys from Paradise. They're comin' fer to see what—I feel jest like I was all-over-be-durned: yes, I *do*, now! The way you tuck tumble jest then! An' the idee of it all—"

"That's all right, pardner, but I'm all kicking, and as for the other fellow—well, if I wasn't a purely religious character just at present, I'd feel most powerfully tempted to offer you modest odds that the clew to the whole secret lies right over in yon bushes: too cold to skin!"

By now the cries and hurried footfalls came more distinctly to their ears, and Beautiful Jack turned in that direction, outwardly as cool and collected as ever in his life, gently dabbing at his freshly branded face with a handkerchief.

"What in time has broken loose over this way, you-all?" cried bluff Abel Garrone, at the head of the returning company. "From the way you've been tucksting caps—hellow! Who's plugged *you*, old man?"

"That's what I'm waiting for you gentlemen to aid in finding out," coolly answered the Double-Edged Sport, smiling at those curious faces the while.

"Some pesky critter let slap at him from crosst the river, yender," volunteered Crimmins, slipping a final shell into the magazine. "Blame my pelt ef I didn't think—drapped him all in a heap, like he was throwed too mighty cold fer skinnin', too!"

"But I'm worth more than a cent a pound for soap-grease, all the same," lightly cried the Sport; then adding, in more business-like tones: "I'm going over yonder to inspect my target. Who's with me?"

No need for words where actions spoke so positively, yet hardly one of all that little company but declared his purpose of backing up the Sport, as Beautiful Jack flashed a look up and down the river, looking for a practicable crossing.

"Right yender; I know whar—good Lawd-ee!"

Still intensely wrought up, Harlow Crimmins took speedy action, leading the way down stream for a few score yards, then dropping over the rocks to a fairly practicable shore below.

Here the surface of the water was broken by a few scattered rocks, denoting a shallow, such as may be so frequently found in mountain streams of this description.

It was by no means an easy passage, calling for agile limbs, limber muscles, sure eye and firm foot; but the old

mountaineer boldly led the way, leaping from rock-tip to rock-point, zigzagging hither and yon, but all the time drawing nearer the further shore.

Where one so readily led, few could hesitate to follow, and none dared actually refuse, although there was rather more than an equal promise of wet feet if not an entire bath for the less expert in that art.

One or two mishaps of the sort did take place, but the water was not deep enough to make it dangerous, and the party was too intensely earnest to spare laugh or jest for such misfortunes.

Harlow Crimmins showed the passage over river, but there his leadership ended. Jack passed the mountaineer by, speeding up-river at a rate which few men could equal.

Although he had spoken little, and that little with hardly a show of excitement or of anger, his heart was hot within him, and he fiercely thirsted for revenge upon the dastard who had attempted his life.

Through it all he had but briefly lost sight of yonder covert, and now, as he drew nearer to the spot, he felt fairly assured that the author of that treacherous shot had not been able to break or to skulk away unseen.

Revolver in hand, Beautiful Jack clambered up those rocks toward the little clump of bushes, now able to take note of more than one freshly splintered stem or bough where his swiftly delivered shots had taken effect.

Not a shot, not a sound came from the shelter, and then the Man from Gypsum gained his goal to find—nothing!

Nothing that he so fiercely longed to find; that is, nothing to show that his skin-break had been fully avenged.

"The cur!" he muttered, eyes busy the while. "Took a shot from cover and then jumped out the back door!"

"Who was it? What ye got, anyway?" pantingly cried Abel Garrone, now well at the head of the party. "Save a bit o' the pinny-poppy show for us poor devils who—blame such a boulevard, anyway!"

This as foot slipped to let him down in an awkward heap, over which Harlow Crimmins tripped and another couple stumbled ere their eager rush could be checked.

And the reward for it all was so wretchedly poor!

Bushes splintered, boughs cut off, rocks showing blue marks where those varying shots had flattened out or glanced off to whistle further; but no corpse of assassin, no blood-marks to show that even one of those well-meant pellets had borne a billet.

Seemingly the coolest one in that company, Beautiful Jack pointed to where a black spot marred the white rock standing just at the edge of those bushes.

"I wasn't so far out of my judgment, gentlemen," he said easily. "There's where the whelp took rest with his gun; that's a powder-burn. Then he sneaked back—yonder!"

The rocks sloped abruptly from the rear of those bushes, making a ditch amply large enough to cover a crouching man, leading a few feet to the left, then entering a narrow crack which wound through what from the opposite side of the little river seemed a solid rock-wall.

Jack took this course, looking in vain for drop of blood to show that his fusillade had been of partial success. And then—he gave a subdued snort of disgust as they looked forth upon an open tract where a score of enemies might have beaten an easy retreat.

Their keenest glances failed to discover aught in human shape, dead or living, and then the hunt was abandoned.

"Whoever it was has had time enough to win a couple of miles away by this, and anything short of a bloodhound couldn't pick up a trail on ground of this description," declared Beautiful Jack, pausing. "Well, better luck next time!"

"Who do you reckon it was?" curiously asked Abel Garrone.

"You tell, for I don't know how. Some close kin to the devils who murdered my poor old Daddy Baker, no doubt. And so—I'll even-up in the end; yes, I will, now!"

Very quietly Beautiful Jack uttered those words, but in face and eyes those men read the truth; that gentle promise was a registered oath. That oath would be kept, or its author would die while trying.

Again Beautiful Jack thanked the men from Paradise Park for the interest and sympathy they had shown in his behalf. Again he promised to meet them, when he might be able to offer something of benefit to both sides, until when—good-by!

"I don't ask you to take my side of this ugly affair, gentlemen, nor will I until you are fully convinced that I stand for the right; but, all the same, I *do* ask this much; don't side in with those fellows who are jumping the claim of a dead man, without they can read their title clear."

Then, without pausing for further talk, Beautiful Jack moved off in company with Harlow Crimmins, turning face toward the mountain shack once more. And when no other ears were near, Jamison warned the old man to guard well the will and title deeds given him by Reese Baker, for the enemy would spare no pains to secure full possession.

"An' you; his true bornded son?" hesitatingly spoke the hunter.

"Easy, pardner! I may see fit to be Jacky Baker to those knaves, but I'll not lie to you, nor to *her*. I'm only Beautiful Jack, from Gypsum!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE DETECTIVE GIVES FAIR WARNING.

"Well, of course it's pretty much the proper thing to do, looking at the situation from a civilized standpoint; but, all the same, it's hardly the fashion out here in this wild and woolly section; no, it just isn't, my good fellow!"

The speaker was Abel Garrone, and his single auditor was Beautiful Jack, the Sport from Gypsum.

The time was nearly four-and-twenty hours later, the place out in the rough hills lying north of Paradise Park.

During this interval the Double-Edged Sport had by no means been wholly idle, although all of his doings were known by no single man.

For one thing, he had paid a visit to the mountain shack with Harlow Crimmins, and while there gave a bit of good advice anent that will and the blood-stained deeds which Reese Baker gave in care of the old hunter lest they fall into the hands of his murderers.

Jack made father and daughter realize how all-important those documents might become in case of an open war for the dead man's mine. He himself declined to touch them, repeating here what he had said out among those rocks; while he might deem it best for these, his friends, to assume name and identity of the long-missing son, John Baker, to them he was and should remain merely Beautiful Jack, from Gypsum.

"One lie more or less when fighting such rascals can cut no figure," he declared, coolly. "If I can balk them by swearing I'm Jacky Baker, be sure I'll do just that. After—well, I hardly reckon we'll ever quarrel over the ownership of the mine; do *you*, Mrs. Dingle?"

Fanny shook her head in silence, but a rosy color stole into her fair cheeks as those keen black eyes looked upon her. Why?

From cabin Beautiful Jack passed over to Paradise Park, seemingly all at ease, yet nevertheless keeping on the keen alert lest he meet with a dangerous reminder of his quarrel with Dr. Eakins and Hugh Forepaugh.

But nothing of the sort took place. Though Paradise Park was by no means a great city, Jamison saw nothing of either adversary, even when he leisurely "went the rounds" that evening after

putting a part of his programme into operation.

What that next step was the following day proved, and after looking up Abel Garrone, Jack showed him a few boldly printed posters, warning one and all against further trespassing upon the property of the undersigned, son and legal heir to Reese Baker, deceased.

All who had ventured to jump any claim owned or controlled at the time of his death by said Reese Baker, were warned to immediately vacate, under full penalty as prescribed by law.

Abel Garrone viewed this procedure with dubiety, but Beautiful Jack seemed wholly satisfied his course was the one right and proper to be taken, and then asked the citizen to act as his witness for that occasion.

"I'm going to keep well inside the law, do you mind? I'm going up yonder to post these bills at shack and mine entrance. I'm not so sure they'll be permitted to remain—"

"Or you to post them!"

"Oh, I'll do that part of it all right," cheerfully declared the Double-Edged Sport. "What I want most is a reputable witness to that same posting. With you to prove that, the rest will come easily enough."

Abel Garrone agreed to play the part assigned him, but, all the same, he held to his doubts as at first expressed.

And so he repeated when the twain were drawing near the shanty formerly occupied by Reese Baker; but Beautiful Jack had the same answer in readiness.

"Right is right, and law is law, my dear sir. No matter what other fellows may see fit to do, I'm going to keep on the right side of the fence until—"

"Until you are fitted for a high lot on the hillside!"

"Well, no; hardly that bad," with a bit of a laugh which sounded almost musical upon the balmy mountain air. "I never did make a practice of dying prematurely, and I'm too old to learn new tricks now. And so—when I can't do better, then I'll fight the devil with his own fire."

Just then they came in sight of the Baker cabin, and Beautiful Jack singled out one of the printed posters brought with him for that purpose, easily striding toward that closed front door.

He was still a few rods distant when the ugly muzzle of a Winchester was thrust through that partly lifted window, and a harsh voice spoke:

"Keep yer distance, thar, stranger, or—I'll plug ye fer keeps!"

"Oh, I guess not," easily retorted the Man from Gypsum, still advancing, but at the same time lifting an open hand by way of truce.

"I guess yes. Stop right thar, I tell ye! Stop, or—croak!"

"Light on that trigger, my good fellow," warned the Double-Edged Sport, still advancing toward the cabin, poster in hand. "I'm here on business, and bluster don't go. If you should happen to shoot—"

"Don't I give fa'r warnin' I *will* shoot, darn ye?"

"If you should happen to hit the mark and turn me toes up to the daisies, so much the worse for you. Paradise Park would come in a heap to ask who, and why, and wherefore? Then—well, you're a tolerably fair specimen right now, stranger, but after a few hours at the lower end of a rope, how do you reckon you'd stack up?"

With admirable coolness Jack played his part, neither quickening nor slackening his pace an atom, despite the fact that his heart was lined by that threatening repeater, while a single contraction of forefinger would almost certainly ring his death-note.

But his very audacity helped to carry the day, and that shot remained unfired, when Abel Garrone called out in hasty warning:

"Hold your fire, Perkins! The gentleman only means to tack up a poster warning you all to vacate, and—"

"Not on this yer shack, he hain't, then!"

"But I am, all the same," retorted Beautiful Jack, coming on with unshaken nerve. "Don't you play ass, Perkins. You're paid for—what?"

"To hold this yer shack ag'inst ary darn cuss which—"

"All right. You're paid to keep other people out. I'm not wanting to come in—just yet. I'll merely tack up this warning to vacate, with Mr. Garrone as witness to the action—like this!"

With revolver-butt used as hammer, Beautiful Jack tacked the placard upon the door, then leisurely read it, from scare-head to signature for the benefit of Mr. Perkins on guard, then briefly advised that gentleman to skin out of the sinking vessel ere he was caught in the whirlpool born of its destruction.

This duty coolly performed, Beautiful Jack turned away and rejoined his witness, laughing lightly at the compliments given his pretty nerve.

"Little credit mine, dear fellow," was the easy response. "Those rough tools are rarely dangerous to one who knows how to handle them. 'Twould have been different if either master-spirit had been present."

"You mean?" hesitated the citizen of Paradise Park.

"Either Dr. Eakins or Hugh Forepaugh; yes," was the answer. "But let's get along; another poster stuck up at the entrance to the mine, and this part of my work is finished."

"After that comes—just what?"

"What an overruling Providence permits," with another easy chuckle which certainly betrayed no serious fear for what that same future might hold in store for himself or for his newly formed friends.

Pretty much the same performance was gone through with at the second place as at the cabin; only Beautiful Jack was not permitted, nor did he attempt to, draw quite so nigh the forbidden spot.

Again he was met with an armed front, and again did the bold Sport laugh in the very face of menaced death.

"I'm keeping well inside the law, strangers," he declared, moving up to a scrubby tree which his eye selected as the most suitable for his purpose. "If I'm shot down while so acting, you'll have to answer to a charge of murder. And the penalty for that is—dead easy to guess!"

Here, as at the cabin, naught was seen or heard of either Dr. Eakins or Hugh Forepaugh. If present, one or both evidently deemed it wisest to keep well in the background, leaving lesser lights to act instead.

Jack tacked poster to tree, once again clearly reading the warning there put in type, then adding a final word of his own accord.

"Tell your masters what I've told you. Tell them—what they can read here if so inclined—that I grant just four-and-twenty hours' armistice. If they pull up stakes and vacate, leaving all as well as they found it, good enough; I'll wipe off the slate and start a fresh score."

"If, on the other hand, they are as big fools as their actions so far indicate, and think to hold fast all they've grabbed, so much the worse for their own selves, so much the better for their legal heirs!"

"Mind; twenty-four hours' truce. At the end of that period of grace I'll return, prepared to reclaim my own. And if I *have* to, I'll start up one of the prettiest graveyards in this section you ever heard tell of in all your lives!"

Without pausing for retort or answer, Beautiful Jack turned away, moving off in company with Abel Garrone, who felt a still stronger admiration for this Dandy from Gypsum.

Jack never seemed more cheery in life than during that trip back to Paradise Park, but he positively declined to be drawn into any argument, or to talk further about the claim-jumping.

"You heard me tell them, pardner; a complete truce for four-and-twenty hours."

That includes tongue as well as hands, speech as well as bullets and cold steel. So—fine climate, isn't it?"

It was fairly dusk when town was regained, and Abel Garrone parted with Jack, to hasten to his own home, so unusually neglected that busy day.

For his part, the Double-Edged Sport seemed in no especial hurry to reach the hotel in which he had secured lodgings, but moved leisurely through the streets, already lighted through open doors and clear windows.

Thinking of the claim-jumping, and wondering what had become of the other claimants, Jack was in the act of passing a well-lit-up saloon, when the sound of harsh tones and harsher words stopped him.

"Beautiful Jack is a liar, fraud and cur! If he ever crosses my path again, I'll strip off his mangy pelt and hang it on the fence to dry!"

CHAPTER XIX.

HUGH FOREPAUGH EATS DIRT.

There was no room for mistaking either name or threats. Viciously distinct came the first, brutally plain rung forth the other.

And just as surely the Sport-detective recognized the speaker, although as yet he had evidence of ears alone to go by.

"Playing even for that knock-out, are you, Mr. Forepaugh?" the Double-Edged Sport muttered as he quickly placed the voice. "If you could only do as well as you promise, what a tremendous chief you would be—I don't think!"

The yellow light coming through the wide window near which he had paused showed the ghost of a smile upon that scarred face. Showed, too, how those strong hands were feeling for the ever-ready forty-fours which their owner knew so well how to use on occasion.

Apparently as cool as though merely about to enter a harmless game of chaff, instead of facing a "big chief" on his own stamping-ground, the Man from Gypsum made sure both pistols were in perfect working condition, then stepped quickly and silently upon the threshold of the "Senate," wherein Hugh Forepaugh was now holding forth to a select circle of citizens after his own fashion.

A single glance about that large room told Beautiful Jack he would have plenty of witnesses to whatever might transpire shortly, but among them all he could pick out not one whom he might with confidence call a friend, although he recognized several men who had passed over to take a more or less prominent part in the burial of Reese Baker.

Hugh Forepaugh was standing close to the bar, whisky-glass in hand, while he ranted about the Double-Edged Sport and how dearly he would love to read the cur a lesson not to be forgotten in a hurry; but knowing how quickly recognition must come his way through one or another of the citizens there assembled, Jack took speedy action.

He slipped quickly along until his rear was guarded by the solid wall itself, then guns came to a level with hammers set, his voice ringing forth sharply and distinctly:

"You're a liar by the watch, Hugh Forepaugh!"

Swift as thought the gambler whirled to face in that direction, glass dropping from hand and both members instinctively moving toward a weapon, only to be as abruptly checked when Beautiful Jack added:

"Steady, you foul-mouthed cur! Keep your dukes in full sight or I'll blow ye through!"

An instinctive scattering took place among the other men, knowing from past experience that this was "fighting chin-chin," while a few of their number gave little cries of friendly warning to Forepaugh.

Little need of that, however.

A single glimpse of man and pistols told the gambler how desperately he was cornered, and how slight was his chance

of coming out of the affair with honor to himself as a man of nerve.

"Keep your fingers out of this little pudding, please, gentlemen," cried Jack, gun in left hand moving to cover the crowd as it recoiled from the danger-center. "It's man to cur, now, and Pretty Hughey is elected to do the howling."

"Let up; give me even the ghost of a chance, you devil!" hoarsely cried the card-sharp, pale as death, involuntarily shrinking a bit from that grim muzzle in spite of his effort to show pure nerve.

"Anything like the chance you offered me, the other day, when you tried to double-bank me from the rear?" sneeringly asked the Sport, probably the only personage inside those four walls who was thoroughly enjoying himself, just then.

"I never—I'll fight you when, where, any way you dare nominate, you devil! Only—give me a show, I say!"

"You bet I just will, pardner; and that's a lie, for low down as I've fallen of late days, I'm just a notch above parding in with a mangy cur whose hide is only fit for stripping off to hang upon a fence for drying," mocked the Double-Edged Sport, rubbing it in mercilessly.

"Give me even half a show for—"

"Yes. A whole show, after you've eaten the words I caught you spitting forth when you fancied the man you were assailing with your foul stuff was far out of hearing. Steady, you hound! Make a move which isn't after my orders, and I'll fit you for a high lot on the hillside."

"Oh, come, now, stranger!" expostulated the man standing back of the bar, in placable tones. "Give Forepaugh a chance for his money, anyway."

"That's exactly what I'm doing," quickly retorted the Sport, still holding the edge with practiced skill. "First, Hugh Forepaugh, repeat after me the words, 'I lied like a cur when I called Beautiful Jack—' go on, you scoundrel, or I'll salivate you for keeps!"

The gambler found it a terribly bitter pill to swallow, particularly before so large an audience; but he knew, too, that refusal to do so would almost certainly end in death or at least a crippling shot.

"I'll kill you for all this, curses cover you over!" he snarled.

"It's my innings, now. Yours may come later, provided you eat your words of a bit ago. Come; last call and final warning. Say it over after me, or I'll turn you to soap-grease, Hughey."

And then, word for word, making each epithet painfully distinct, the Double-Edged Sport repeated the sentence which had caught his notice from the street, winding up with an admission that he, Hugh Forepaugh, publicly ate his foul lies.

It was anything but an agreeable exhibition, although Beautiful Jack was hardly the sole one to enjoy it after a fashion. The gambler had some enemies, and those who happened to be present took ample notes for future reference, provided Forepaugh should survive that ordeal.

"Now, you infernal—"

"Not quite so fast, Mr. Forepaugh," crisply interrupted the Man from Gypsum, still holding the drop. "You've only swallowed your own foul medicine, so far; now take a weenty dose from my shop. Down on your bended knees, you cowardly whelp; down, I say, or I'll—good enough!"

There was death in voice and in face, just then, and almost involuntarily Hugh Forepaugh obeyed, giving a half-curse, half-groan as he so far humiliated himself before witnesses.

But even yet the Sport was not satisfied, and sternly spoke on:

"You've eaten your own words, dog, now—eat dirt!"

Sharp and stern came that command, and little cries came from all parts of the saloon. Hardly one present but fully comprehended just what those two words meant, although but few had ever seen them put in full force; for that meant

sure death to follow, unless he who obeyed proved arrant coward.

"Kill me if you like, but I'll never—"

"Eat dirt, I tell you!" pitilessly commanded Beautiful Jack, eyes ablaze, that diagonal scar showing fairly purple under the lamplight which was reflected off those plated tubes of death. "Eat dirt or chew lead; take your choice, Hugh Forepaugh!"

A brief pause, the utter silence of which was actually painful, then the gambler bowed his head and lapped the sanded floor with his tongue!

A clear, mocking laugh rung forth an instant later, and as the gambler staggered half-blinded to his feet, Jack called out:

"Now I'll give you the fair-shake you begged for, Hughey. Pull your guns and—"

But there came swift interposition from both sides, several men grasping Forepaugh and holding him in restraint, while others barred the Double-Edged Sport's way, even while treating him with a bit more consideration.

All this came in behalf of law and order, but the gambler, pale as corpse, too deeply shaken up for clear speech, viciously refused to listen to his friends, hoarsely crying out:

"I'll kill him or he'll kill me! I'll never let this night pass to see both of us alive! Off, you devils! Let me get at him or I'll—"

"He's not fit to tackle a man of your caliber, stranger," expostulated one of the citizens, facing Jack. "Wait until we can get him sobered up a bit more. It'd be rank murder to jump him, the way he stacks up right now."

"Oh, I'm perfectly well satisfied to rest at ease, gentlemen," frankly declared the Man from Gypsum, smiling broadly, as well he might afford, since his was the victory thus far.

"Never! I'll kill him, or he's got to down me for keeps!" still raged the humiliated gambler, though his fierce struggles to break away from his friends had ceased by this. "Turn us both loose, and let the best man come out on top!"

"All right, to whatever the crowd decides," coolly spoke the Double-Edged Sport, still with back guarded by wall, but otherwise seeming entirely at his ease. "Let us each pick a friend to serve. Let them say just how we're to settle matters, and when, and where. I'm open to anything from fists to burros. We can find plenty of room outside. Or—shut us up in a dark room and leave us to play Kilkenny cats on a clothesline, if that sounds any better."

All at once Hugh Forepaugh calmed down, even showing teeth in a forced smile as he stood glaring across at his so far triumphant enemy.

"You'd like the outside part of it, no doubt, you cur. It's too dark there for fine shooting, but it'd give you a chance to skulk and run."

"Well, now, do you know, I never once thought of that," mocked Jack. "Shows how much greater experience you've had in ways that are dark and tricks that are vain! Only—don't misplace your pronouns quite so palpably, next time, Hughey, dear."

"You can chin-chin glibly enough. I'm giving you so much credit. But that can't save you much longer," declared Forepaugh, still speaking with forced composure.

"After what has happened this evening, so far, one or the other of us two has got to go over the range. If you don't kill me, I'll kill you. That is dead certain, and no dodging can help you out of the corner."

"I'm so mighty fond of dodging, too! Pity you're so intensely bloodthirsty, my dear fellow, but since you will have it that way—listen."

"I'll agree to see you decently planted after all is over, though I feel it's a pity to cheat the hangman out of his dues. Now—nominate your man and get down to solid business, you whelp of Satan!"

CHAPTER XX.

A DUEL WITH CLOSED DOORS.

Just then swift footfalls were heard without the door, and as a tall, shapely figure reached the threshold, there to pause for a brief space, a clear, cold voice made itself heard by all within the Senate:

"I'll stand by you, Mr. Forepaugh, in any way, shape or manner the law may prescribe."

Beautiful Jack turned partly in that direction at this coming, his right hand easily crossing his middle, still gripping revolver.

This weapon had been lowered during that sharp parley, though not yet returned to its holster. And now, recognizing that step by instinct, the Man from Gypsum had his gun in waiting even before Dr. Ralph Eakins fairly became visible to the outward eye.

If the physician saw the Double-Edged Sport in that single swift glance he flashed around the saloon, he made no sign of recognition, pausing barely long enough to make that brief statement, then strode forward to join the white-faced but red-hot gambler.

It is really remarkable how wind of an "affair" will carry to friend and foe, and how scant a time it really takes to gather a crowd of witnesses, one and all eager to see and hear everything, or to play a more prominent part in the "circus," as circumstances may warrant.

Dr. Eakins seemed fully posted ere he stepped within those walls, and while Abel Garrone had hastened to his cosy home and interesting family, almost without going through the formality of bidding the Man from Gypsum good-by, here he was now, bustling and red-faced, just a bit short of breath, but long on friendship, as one look into his honest countenance fairly assured the Double-Edged Sport.

As Dr. Eakins came forward, the other man drew back as by instinct, knowing how closely the tie of friendship was drawn in this instance.

"What's gone crooked, man?" asked the physician, in low tones, as a hand firmly gripped the arm nearest him. "You're shivering, Hugh; that's no way to meet yonder devil on ten wheels, don't you know it?"

"It's pure mad, not through fear," muttered the gambler by way of reassurance. "Let me play with that devil, and I'll be all right again, never you worry, pardner!"

"That cur, is it?"

"Yes. He caught me foul, and made me—eat dirt! I'll kill him this night, or he's got to down me for keeps! And so—"

"You mean it, Forepaugh? Eat dirt—you?"

"It was that, or die without the ghost of a chance to play even. I swore to do that, and not even you can hinder, Eakins."

A half-smile flitted across that comely face as the doctor turned head for a quick glance at Beautiful Jack. Surely he was not any too eager to prevent such an encounter, friendly though he might feel toward this knight of the green cloth.

But as his eyes came back to his chum, nothing of that smile was left, and he seemed wholly absorbed in best pleasing the gambler.

"Of course, you've got to down the fellow, Forepaugh—"

"It's either that or jump the town. The boys would fairly run me out, else. So—business, man!"

"Business goes. How would you prefer to have it, Hugh? Which way would you feel safest to meet the fellow? Just give me a hint, and I'll see that the cards run to your liking this deal."

Forepaugh drew a quick breath, but shook his head slightly ere saying:

"You can't stock the cards, Doc; worse luck!"

"No. It's too public an affair," his voice lowering until there was no chance for other ears to catch even a sound. "It's got to be a straight deal, and that is why I'm asking you the how."

"I'll back you up from start to finish, and stick out for whatever game you like the notion of best. So—what's the word, Forepaugh?"

A brief pause for reflection, then the gambler spoke in his turn.

"It's got to be sure work, remember. I believe I'm a quicker shot than he, and a surer one, too. So—make it revolvers, go as you please, in a room of some sort where we can have plenty of light to catch the drop by. Understand?"

Meanwhile Beautiful Jack was not wholly idle.

Honest Abel Garrone at once made up to the Double-Edged Sport, for whom he had formed a strong if rather sudden liking, and to him Jamison frankly stated the situation.

"I could let the cur use me as a sprinkling-post, you know," declared Jack, with a half-grin, twisting that diagonal scar. "I just had to chip when the fellow bled so mighty loud. And after making him swallow his words and eat dirt—"

"Glorious Abraham! And he did that—Hugh Forepaugh?"

"Well, hardly as though he liked the diet, I'm frank to admit," the Sport said, with a subdued chuckle at the remembrance. "But he took the dose, all the same. And so—I feel in duty bound to give him whatever chance he may ask, now."

"It's a killing affair, you understand?"

"Of course. I'll be cheating the common hangman out of a job, but maybe I can find some one else to take his place at a pinch."

"You talk as though 'twas all over but shouting!"

"And so it is," coolly retorted the Man from Gypsum. "I'll give the fellow all the chance he can ask, but the ending will be the same. And yet, if possible, I'll only cripple, not kill, this time."

Abel Garrone drew a long breath which but feebly expressed the wonder he really felt. Surely this stranger within their gates must be a mighty chief! Or—was it mere fanfaronade?

If so, Jack was bent on carrying it through to the end, for he spoke on, now in clear, business-like tone and manner.

"You're kind enough to act as my second, Mr. Garrone, and after all is over, I'll see how I can best give you thanks. For now—listen:

"Forepaugh will have Dr. Eakins act for him, and you two must settle all preliminaries between you. Agree to any mode of settlement, just so that I'm given a fair shake with the fellow. Agree to all they may ask, just so it puts us face to face, man to man, on an equal footing."

"Of course, I'll see that you don't get the worst of the bargain," gravely assured Garrone. "But surely you have your particular? Surely you are better at some one way, pardner?"

"Oh, I'm the easiest fellow to suit you ever stacked up against, old friend. Whatever method pleases Mr. Forepaugh will suit me down to the ground. Only—make it short and sure, even if not too sweet!"

The Double-Edged Sport cut his words off short, for he saw his two arch-enemies separate, Dr. Eakins turning toward that quarter of the room, and knew that he was looking for the other's second.

"You meet him, Garrone. If I had to chin-chin with the devil, I'd surely have a new fight on my hands. And first come, first served," the Sport swiftly whispered, then drawing back a bit, while Abel Garrone stepped forward to meet the doctor.

No one offered the slightest interference, for one and all of those present knew as by instinct that they were to "have a fight for their money," and that these two gentlemen were to arrange the precise terms.

Where each principal was more than willing to fight, little time need be wasted by their seconds, nor was this an exceptional instance.

Less than a quarter of an hour was spent in consultation, then the doctor, by common consent, made known the terms decided upon.

"The fight will take place as quickly as possible. The men will be armed with revolvers, of their own choice, backed up by a knife or dagger, at their own will."

"The duel will come off with closed doors, said room being thoroughly lighted up with lamps to be supplied. That room is the old Morgan building, now vacant."

"One man will stand at the front door, the other at the rear, ready for business. At sound of pistol-shot, the doors shall be thrown open and the principals shall go inside, the doors to be closed after them as quickly as possible."

"In order that there may be no room for foul play, or trickery unbecoming gentlemen, and this, our fair city, each principal will be accompanied to his station by two men, one of whom shall be elected by Mr. Garrone, the other by myself. Those four men will see to opening and closing the doors, fairly and honestly, without favor to either side under full penalty."

"After the signal-shot is fired, and the doors properly sprung, the principals must settle matters as best they can. And may the good Lord show mercy to the poor devil who gets the hot end of the poker!"

There could be no objections raised to this scheme, by either principals or outsiders. If it denied the witnesses full sight, it at least offered them a novelty, in the way of a duel with closed doors, and that would be worth all the rest.

So, amid cheers and excited comments, the rest of the arrangements were completed, and the principals conducted to their respective stations for the test of nerve and skill.

Then a complete silence fell over the crowd as Dr. Eakins, elected by toss of coin to fire the signal-shot, stood in full view with right arm uplifted, hand gripping butt and finger on trigger of revolver.

"Are you both ready, gentlemen?" rung forth his clear voice.

The duelists responded in unison, then another pause, when finger contracted, hammer fell, cartridge responded, and—the ball was opened.

Swift as thought itself those two doors were jerked open, the duellists leaped within the brilliantly illuminated room, the doors clanged to again.

And blending with that crash came the spiteful bark of a revolver, in the swiftest of all snap-shots!

So swiftly came that explosion that not one among all of those without the doors could place the shot: whether at front or from rear, it was unable to tell; all one could feel certain about was that the shot came from inside the building; no more!

Had Hugh Forepaugh made good his fierce boast of wiping out his bitter humiliation with the heart's-blood of the Man from Gypsum?

Was the Double-Edged Sport right in holding that his star was in the ascendant? Who was to prove the victor in this duel with closed doors?

CHAPTER XXI.

VICTOR AND VANQUISHED.

That single shot, coming so quickly after the entrance of the duellists that one could scarcely think it possible sight and aim had been caught, yet but the fraction of an instant later was heard an indistinct cry of rage or pain—then other shots in rapid succession.

One thing was sufficiently clear now. Neither man had been killed or wholly disabled by that initiatory shot, for reports came from both front and rear of that long building now.

Intense excitement reigned without, where two fairly equally divided factions had been formed, almost without effort of a conscious sort.

Dr. Eakins stood where he had taken position to fire the signal-shot, now half-

crouching, right hand still armed, every line of his athletic figure fairly instinct with fierce passion.

To see him now one might almost believe him a principal in this duel to a finish; and more than one of those who did take note of the man of medicine in those thrilling moments, felt that right here might be found Beautiful Jack's most dangerous adversary.

Abel Garrone was one who took such note, having a better chance to see and hear than the majority, by virtue of his office; for that placed him close to the doctor as representative of the Jamison interests; and despite the fierce excitement and strong suspense which he felt in common with all the rest, Honest Abel let fall a swift word of warning.

"Fair play, doctor. You can't afford to make a wrong move in this affair, while—"

Garrone had time for no more, for just then stern tones made themselves heard within that long building where the shooting had abruptly ceased.

"Beg for your life, you cur, or I'll blow your brains out!"

A savage cry and curse commingled broke from Dr. Eakins' lips at that, for he only too readily recognized the voice of—not the one whom he so viciously prayed might prove the victor, but that of Beautiful Jack, the Double-Edged Sport from Gypsum!

Other cries broke forth, but that one in particular seemed to dominate all others, so far as one pair of ears were concerned; for, stern and commanding came a cry from within those closed doors:

"Go easy, Ralph Eakins. You chip in before your turn, and I'll shoot you as I would a crazy wolf! And—beg, you cripple; beg for your miserable life, or I'll send you over the range a-kiting!"

"Oh-h-h! kill me—kill me outright, you devil!"

"I'd heap-sight rather hear you beg, Hugh Forepaugh," came the merciless rejoinder. "Quick! I've got you lined, and I can drive a tack with each and every shot at this range, by this light. Beg, I say!"

"Kill me! I'd rather—oh, I'm all—shot to—pieces!"

"I will kill you unless—beg while there's a chance for life, Hugh Forepaugh! I hold your life at my fingertip. It's justly forfeited by the rules under which we're fighting. I have a perfect right to snuff out your light, but—don't make me do it, you fool! Beg for mercy, such as neither you nor yonder backer would show me had fate turned in your favor. Beg, I say, for the last time!"

A brief pause, then in hoarse, despairing tones came the reply:

"Enough, you demon! I can't—I'm bleeding to death, and—I beg—beg for—don't shoot any more!"

"That's good enough for a hog!" cried the Double-Edged Sport, whose sense of justice seemed fairly satisfied by that admission. "I say, you Forepaugh fellows out yonder; come in and get your lame duck, for I reckon he needs help the worst way. Come, but mind; come with empty hands and flag of truce a-flying, or I'll give the coroner fresh material to work upon; I will, for an honest fact, now!"

The Double-Edged Sport clearly meant that there should be no room left for mistaking his platform on this occasion. His grim warning rung forth so distinctly that every witness within sight knew just what to expect in case any crooked work should be attempted.

Dr. Ralph Eakins was the first man to take action, springing with pantherish speed to yonder rear door, dashing it open and entering without thought for his own safety; just then he cared only for his principal, who had so signally come to grief at the hands of their mutual enemy.

Almost as speedily moved Abel Garrone, coming by way of the front, and giving a short exclamation as he took in the scene before him.

Hugh Forepaugh was lying in a heap near his end of the building, helplessly crippled by superior skill as a snap-shot, his boasted nerve now almost gone, his voice husky and trembling as he bemoaned his hard luck and cursed his victor in one and the same breath.

Jack stood erect, to all seeming wholly unharmed, a half-smile upon his scarred face, hands still gripping revolvers, as though he more than half expected further use for the tools ere the end was won.

Then, as Dr. Eakins tried to aid and soothe his defeated friend, the Double-Edged Sport called out in sharp, clear tones:

"How is it, gentlemen? Have I violated any of the conditions as laid down for our guidance?"

"Never a bit, sir, and I congratulate you upon your mag—"

"Wait, please," curtly interrupted the Man from Gypsum. "Let's hear from the other end of the house, first. Speak up, gentlemen; was all conducted fairly and squarely, on my part? Or—shall the ball open up once more?"

"Don't try to rub it in too deep, sir," harshly spoke the man of medicine, flashing a vicious look that way. "Forepaugh is crippled, too badly for handling his guns. You know that, curse you!"

"Did I play fair? that's the main point. Own up, or I'll clear the room and finish the work so well begun," sternly vowed Beautiful Jack.

"Don't—I beg—I can't—oh-h-h!"

"My man gives up. Yes, fair enough, but—"

"That's heap-plenty, coming from you, Old Pill-and-powders," coolly interposed the Double-Edged Sport. "I'd be a fool to expect anything white or decent coming from your direction, so—let it be so! Come, Garrone: reckon we might as well remove ourselves, don't you think?"

Jack turned toward the front door, now fairly jammed with eager spectators who were only kept from flocking inside by a wholesome fear of flying lead in case that little dispute should not be entirely settled.

"Of course we will, since you say—I say, though!" and Garrone gave both start and cry as he made a discovery which had until that moment escaped his eyes.

"Wait a bit," quickly said Jack, left hand slipping through the arm nearest him with meaning pressure. "Just ask these gentlemen to open ranks a bit, will you? You know them better than I do, so—"

"Open up, you fellows!" roughly demanded the second, free hand waving impatiently. "Can't you see that this—"

"That fresh air would be a boon," deftly inserted the Double-Edged Sport ere Garrone could complete the sentence begun. "I never *did* like the smell of burning powder: always makes me want to run away and find a hole big enough to crawl into, elastic enough to haul in after me! And so—thanks, gentlemen!"

The two men passed through the crowd and out beneath the merrily twinkling stars, where Abel Garrone found his first chance of saying:

"Lord, man, you're plugged! You're hit, and—how badly?"

His free hand went out to gently touch the flannel shirt where he had noted fresh blood, but Beautiful Jack made easy response as they kept in motion.

"It's nothing to worry over, pardner; just enough to remember this bit of frolic by, please the pigs."

"That's what you say, but, all the same, I'm going to see for myself before—come, man, dear! Let me play doctor a bit, for lack of a better one," urged Garrone, now thoroughly in touch with this newly formed friend.

"All right, pardner! but not out here in public. I'm barely grazed, but if not—if I'd caught a dozen pellets plum-center—I'd still bear up until out of their eye-range! I'd die a thousand-fold rather than give either Forepaugh or Eakins the joy of knowing I'd been hurt."

Although no ardent fighter himself, Abel Garrone was fairly capable of appreciating such a sentiment as this, and seeing how that little crowd of sensation-lovers hung near their rear, he hurried on without further insistence, making as directly as possible for the hotel at which Jack had secured quarters.

Not until they were inside his chamber with closed door and night-lamp lighted, would Beautiful Jack consent to have his injury even looked at; but then it proved to be pretty much as he had declared.

One bullet had struck him, making a clean flesh-wound in his left shoulder, the pellet touching no bone and not remaining in flesh to complicate matters.

"Hardly worth mentioning or bothering over, only for the leaking, you see," lightly declared the Double-Edged Detective, yet submitting with good grace to those friendly fingers. "Tie it up if you like, just so there isn't anything to mark the fact: I'm determined not to give either rascal the satisfaction of knowing that I'm even touched."

"It's amazing: really marvelous, sir!" declared Garrone, with a long breath. "I thought you were fated when you consented to meet Forepaugh at his own best hold: for he's noted far and wide as the best snap-shot in all these parts!"

"Was, you mean," coolly amended the Sport with a smile.

"Of course, since—but how in time did you manage it, man, dear?"

"Well, of course, there was a good bit of luck running through it all, when you get down to bedrock," modestly spoke the Man from Gypsum. "My first shot happened to hit Hughey's front paw: hurt his poor fingers a trifle, I dare say, too! And that hindered his trying one of his famous snap-shots, you see? After—well, I happened to crack his left funny-bone, and—there you are, pardner!"

A brief explanation, truly, but Garrone hardly felt like laughing, just then. And after a bit he said, with a long breath:

"Well, you want to keep all eyes open, for I fancy Forepaugh isn't your worst enemy in Paradise Park. There is Doc Eakins, and he is—"

"I begin to think he's fairly worth cultivating, myself," coolly.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE GAMBLER AND HIS HOODOO.

Hugh Forepaugh had fared but poorly in that duel with closed doors.

It took Dr. Eakins but very few moments to satisfy himself on this point, and merely taking time sufficient to remove coat and sacrifice a portion of the garment for rude bandages to hold the flow of blood in check until more thorough arrangements could be made, he set in motion preparations for a removal to more convenient quarters.

This was quickly managed, for, in spite of his defeat, the gambler could boast a fair following of friends and well-wishers.

An extemporized litter was brought into action, the crippled gambler was placed upon it, groaning and moaning, crushed in spirit even as he was shattered in nerve by that heavy downfall, then carried to his own quarters, a fairly spacious room over a saloon not so very far from the scene of his defeat: none other than the "Senate," where he had been forced at revolver-muzzle to take his first dose of bitter humiliation.

With his patient stretched upon a bed, Dr. Eakins fell to work over him without further delay, looking savagely grave as he noted how serious those injuries were.

Either good luck had marvelously stood by the Double-Edged Sport, or else he was a snap-shot of far more than ordinary skill.

His first shot—fired almost the same second which saw him leap through that open doorway, and before one could think him capable of fairly glimpsing his antagonist, much less securing a certain aim—had crippled the right hand of the gambler, shattering a couple of fingers

until they drooped limply as Dr. Eakins lifted that bloody member, tearing the flesh badly as the lead battered itself against the bone handle of Forepaugh's pet revolver.

This had prevented the gambler from firing a shot with that hand, since the weapon was knocked out of his now nerveless grip, arm falling helplessly, tingling fiercely clear to the shoulder-joint.

And then, when he tried to down his enemy with left hand, shooting wildly through surprise and agony, another shot had completed the awful work.

"Crippled me—crippled me for life!" huskily moaned the defeated duelist, shrinking beneath those ministering hands.

"And you never even touched him; that's worse!" harshly muttered the man of medicine, kept from speaking still plainer by the presence of volunteers whose aid he knew would be wanted when he worked further.

Even Hugh Forepaugh felt a little of this restraint in spite of the agony he was enduring; agony of mind even more than of body, badly as he was injured, and fiercely though those hurts tingled and smarted right now.

"I know—the devil—he's a cursed hoodoo—my hoodoo!"

Knowing well that no skill could avail where those two fingers were concerned, Dr. Eakins deftly amputated them, then bandaged the crippled member as quickly as was consistent with good judgment. For all this while Hugh Forepaugh was losing blood in some degree, although the rude bandages at first applied had prevented a too dangerous flow.

Neither doctor nor his amateur assistants paid much attention to the groans and moans of the patient while working at best speed; and Forepaugh spoke again and again about the ill-luck which had come to him through this thrice-acursed stranger from Gypsum.

"A hoodoo—my hoodoo! I knew it—from the very first! Oh, if I only could play even—play even—play even!"

Once, when it seemed as though the wounded card-sharp might be on the point of saying too much, Dr. Eakins deftly slipped a hand over those lips, bending low until face came near to face, those velvety brown eyes seeming to fairly scorch as they looked.

Not a word was spoken, for other ears were nigh; but that fiercely warning gaze was sufficient, and from that time on, until the amateur assistants were dismissed as being of no further use, never a word passed those lips.

Although Dr. Eakins had grave doubts whether the left arm could be saved its owner, the elbow-joint having been shattered by a bullet, he said naught on that point, but bandaged the member as well as could be done, resolved to wait a while before determining on or against amputation.

He knew that Hugh Forepaugh was in poor condition for such an operation, if only because of his intense chagrin and bitter humiliation.

Then, with many thanks, and a more substantial recognition which was to be expended at some bar, drinking better fortune and a speedy recovery for Hugh Forepaugh, the aids were blandly dismissed by Dr. Eakins.

When they were safely away, and he had renovated his person as far as could be done with the limited means at his command, Ralph Eakins took a seat by that bedside, speaking soberly rather than gently.

"This is a nasty bit of work, pardner."

"Hoodoo—I knew it from the first glance!" groaned the crippled card-sharp. "Curse him—curse him from top to toe!"

"Cursing don't begin to count in a little game like this, Hugh," coldly observed the man of medicine.

"I know, but—look at me, man! Of what worth—what good can I ever do, after all this?"

"Oh, you're worth a dozen dead men, old fellow," more cheerily declared Eakins. "Just now you're 'way down in the mouth, but after you've had a sound sleep and—"

"Sleep!" echoed the gambler, bitterly. "With—all this?"

"I'll give you a draught which will soon calm your nerves, Hugh, but not just yet. You need bracing up after a far different fashion, first-off. And that—how would you rather it came, pardner?"

"That devil—promise me you'll even-up with him for me?"

"I'll do all that without your asking, Hugh," showing teeth briefly as he spoke. "Leaving aside your hurts, he's in my way; entirely too much in my way for his own health, too!"

"Of course he's in the way," said Forepaugh, already rallying and beginning to look something like his usual self, now revenge was coming to the surface. "He must be shoved out of it, too, or we'll never turn another trick—never!"

"Oh, I don't know," said Eakins, with real or well-feigned indifference showing in face as in voice. "What particular harm can the fellow work us?"

"The mine, of course."

"Is that what's worrying you, pardner? There's mighty little need, to my notion. We're in full possession as the matter now stands. We can't be dislodged without more fighting and heavier loss of life than this stranger can pony up. And—you hold the bill of sale, too!"

Hugh Forepaugh shook his head slightly, impatiently, as he listened to all this, so coolly delivered.

"I know. You've said all that before. But, all the same—"

"As often as you croak, I'm in duty bound to reason, old fellow. And so I tell you all over again; possession is a full ten points in this case, and if needed we can have four-fifths of all Paradise Park to back us up in our legal claims."

"If we only had—those other papers!"

"What papers do you mean, pardner?"

"The deeds, the patent—you know, curse it, man! So long as we haven't those to show as fair backing for our bill of sale, what does it all amount to?"

"Everything, my dear boy."

"Nothing—just nothing at all!"

"Pray, how do you make that out, Forepaugh?"

"Would either of us be fools enough to buy such a valuable property without first making sure of all proofs? Would we be content without all documents being transferred?"

By this time the gambler was so thoroughly worked up that he actually seemed to forget his recent hurts. His face was flushed a bit, but that was probably the first tinge of rising fever.

As a physician with a fairly extensive experience in gunshot wounds, Dr. Eakins surely ought to have known that all this talk, so far from quieting the patient, was militating seriously against him; but instead of administering the soothing potion alluded to, he spoke on.

"The deeds, is it?" with a brief, dry-sounding laugh which contained precious little mirth. "Don't let thoughts of those trifles worry you."

"What do you mean, Eakins?"

"Just this much; I know where those documents are at this moment, and I can secure them readily enough, provided I determine that full possession is really essential to our little scheme. Is that clear enough to content you, old fellow?"

"No!" violently exploded the crippled gambler, eyes fairly filled with vicious fire, voice with savage energy. "That devil of a Jamison must be squelched before—"

"Well, possibly he may be, if—"

"Must be, I tell you, man!" fiercely repeated Forepaugh, trying to gesticulate with his right hand, but recalled to his bitter misfortunes by the pang of pain which attended that motion.

With a groan he stirred restlessly upon the bed, then spoke again:

"That devil! He's a hoodoo—from the first turn out of the box he has hoodooed us, Eakins."

"You give him a mighty sight more credit than I'm willing to concede," coldly declared the man of medicine. "A nuisance, perhaps, but as for more—"

"Curse you for a cold-blooded fool, Ralph Eakins! Can't you see? Can't you even begin to see that all our luck will run crooked so long as that hoodoo-devil is left on the loose?"

"You're a trifle off your nut, now, pardner. You'll see more clearly by morning, when you've had time to rally from the shock of all this."

"I'll never rally—never get better until—kill that hoodoo, Eakins; you've just got to kill him! Or—you've got to do this much for me, old fellow, or else I'll—"

"Do what?"

"Draw out of this risky game, once for all; that's what I'll do."

"Draw out, you fool, and I'll—hang you for killing Reese Baker!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

A WARNING TO VACATE.

Although the streets of Paradise Park were kept pretty warm throughout the remainder of that night by citizens who, as a matter of principle, objected to losing any especial "fun" which might be out on the loose, nothing further took place of interest so far as duellists or their friends were concerned.

Believing as they did that Beautiful Jack had escaped without so much as a scratch, and recalling the far from friendly words which had passed between himself and Dr. Eakins, prophets who could "read blood on the face of the moon" were not lacking.

But no such collision took place, and those restless hours were worse than wasted; save to the gentry who ministered unto dry lips and parched throats with regulation charges—in glass.

The night passed by and a new day was born.

Dr. Eakins found Hugh Forepaugh "as well as could be expected" at an early morning call, then the worthy medico—vanished from mortal ken, so far as the record showed.

On his part, Jack was but little later than ordinary in getting abroad after his bit of a "celebration," and to all outward seeming was fresh as a daisy, if not quite so lovely.

No one not in the secret could ever have told that the Double-Edged Sport bore mark of that night-duel. If he rather favored his left arm and shoulder, it was so slightly that no eyes save those in the honest pate of Abel Garrone ever detected that fact.

For now that good citizen was an avowed chum and sturdy adherent, standing up for the Man from Gypsum through thick and through thin, holding himself in readiness to argue the case with any member of the opposition, with tongue, fists, or still more lethal implements.

And so, when the Double-Edged Detective left Paradise Park, seemingly bent on business, little marvel that Abel Garrone was one of those who bore him company.

Two others were of the little company; Major McCann and Remire Croffut, two of the Park's more reputable citizens.

These two gentlemen had been enlisted by Garrone to act as witnesses to the bit of business alluded to: the fair warning which Beautiful Jack now intended giving the claim-jumpers to vacate the mine and outside property of which Reese Baker had died possessed.

"It's pretty much like this, gentlemen," Jamison explained, when the quartette had fairly passed outside of Paradise Park and were well along toward the rising grounds. "While I hold that every moral and legal right is on my side, I prefer acting as peaceably as may be. Of all things in this world I do despise fighting, and—now, what's the matter with you, Mr. Garrone?"

"Beneficent Abraham!" exploded the sturdy citizen. "He wouldn't fight a sick kitten if it was to—oh, Moses!"

"Well, now, I *might* do that much, provided somebody was to clip its claws and hold its head well down in a boot-top," confidentially confessed the Sport. "But that hardly counts, and I started to talk sober business."

"As I was saying, gentlemen, I'd be well within my rights if I was to take a young army at my back and force a way into my own; but that would mean fighting, where somebody might get hurt, and that is what I wish to avoid, above all else."

"In hopes of reaching an amicable arrangement, then, I'm going to give fair warning for the claim-jumpers to vacate forthwith, with you three as witnesses. After that—well, when I've fairly performed my duty, the blame, if any, must rest on other shoulders."

There was no trace of jest or fun-making perceptible in either face or voice, now, and beginning to realize just what that venture might cover, the witnesses pressed on in Jamison's company with few words.

Now, as on the day before when he went to tack up his posters, Jack headed first for the little cabin on the hillside, his jaws squaring just a bit more than usual as he saw that the placard had been torn from the slab door.

"You needn't crowd in any too close, friends," said the Sport as they drew nearer the shack. "You're only here as witnesses, not as actors, remember."

"We're with you clean through, Jamison," declared Garrone.

"No, thanks. If all four went, they might take it as a posse to evict the gang, and so—just let me play on my chin for the little tune necessary, please."

For all the Sport spoke so lightly, his present comrades could hardly mistake his purpose. He meant all he said, and a good deal which he left for them to guess at.

Striding on in advance, then, the Double-Edged Sport flirted a white handkerchief with which he had supplied himself for this express purpose, at the same time calling out in clear tones:

"Hello, the house!"

Again Dick Perkins came to the front, gripping ready Winchester and acting like a man who knew he had ample backing close at hand.

"Hellow your own self, critter! Hain't ye got tired o' traipsin' all over this yer section 'thout—what in blazes do ye want *now*?"

"Who placed you in charge, here, Mr. Perkins?"

"That's all right. I *be* in charge, an' so I tell you, flat: rack out o' this the quicker ye know how, or durned ef I don't fill ye so full o' holes ye'd sell as a sand-sifter! Now—you git!"

"All right, if you can only make it seem right, Mr. Perkins. Now, in turn, I warn you to vacate, one and all. If I find you here when I come to take full possession, the penalty will be yours."

So speaking, Beautiful Jack turned to the right-about, paying not the slightest heed to the ugly curse and hard words flung after him by that armed guard.

"Come, gentlemen," he said, quietly, as he reached the spot where his friends were in waiting. "This ends my present mission here. Next comes the mine itself. And I've a sneaking idea that we'll see heap-sight more fun over in that direction, too!"

"Who was in yonder besides Perkins?" asked Garrone.

"Haven't the ghost of an idea. May not have been any other, since there's mighty little to be gained through holding the shack. It's only for the looks of the thing, I imagine."

"And you really think this is the work of Eakins and Forepaugh?"

"Who else would try it on? They claimed to be principal and witness in the transfer, you remember," coolly said Jamison, betraying no particular interest in the matter, so far as looks went.

"But—we haven't seen either of them up this way," persisted Garrone. "One would think—of course Forepaugh can't well get here, now, but Doc—it's hard to think *he'd* play a hand like this!"

Beautiful Jack made no answer to this observation, although the half-smile, half-sneer which curled his lip just then betokened precious little faith in the man of medicine.

No very great distance separated cabin from mine-entrance, and by this time the Sport and his witnesses came in full view of that goal.

Now, as before, a close and vigilant watch appeared to be kept by the claim-jumpers, and Beautiful Jack was sharply hailed, just as he, in common with his witnesses, made a far from agreeable discovery.

Since his last call, just four-and-twenty hours before, the enemy had been at work, and now a stockade of stout timbers loomed up in front of the mine-entrance, only lacking a few feet of forming a complete semicircle where both ends came flush against that rock wall.

That narrow opening was guarded by armed men, one of whom hailed the newcomers with more force than grace of expression.

"Keerful, thar, ye blame fools! Cross that dead line, or even dast to tetch it with a big toe, an' all blazes cain't keep ye from go-spile!"

"You bark too spiteful for anything better than a flea," quickly answered the Double-Edged Sport, yet coming to a halt. "Where's the big dog of that outfit, anyway?"

"Ef I hev to make my teeth meet, stranger, you'll find I'm plenty big dog enough," retorted that armed guardian.

"Where's Dr. Ralph Eakins, then, since you stand back on your dignity? Shove him to the front if he's too cowardly to take the step himself. I want to see him in person."

"Want'll be your master, I reckon. I'm plenty good 'nough for to lay down the law to the likes o' you all; which the same is jest like this:

"Rack out o' hyar while ye kin. Come ary step furdur, or put on ary mo' dog like ye done bin a-doin' of, an' I'll make a two-legged skimmer out o' ye. So thar, dug-gun ye!"

The fellow lifted his Winchester as though he was fairly eager to begin that work, but Jack never turned a hair, sternly speaking:

"All right. If your boss is too cowardly to show up, and makes a mouthpiece of you, here you can have it, right from the mint."

"This property belongs to me. I have given fair warning to vacate. I now repeat: each and every one of you jumpers are ordered out of and off this property, under penalty."

"Warn be durned!"

"I can fully prove my rights to all property left behind him by Reese Baker. I intend strictly enforcing those rights. I don't wish any more trouble, and for that reason I am giving this additional warning."

"Rack out of this, leaving all in as good order as when you first jumped the claim. I'm going, now, but I'm coming back with sufficient force to carry out my warning. And if any man of you should be found in here at that coming—the consequences rest upon your own heads!"

"Augh! go shake yerself, critter!"

"You'll think your ancestors were rats if I have to shake *you* on my return, pardner," grimly retorted the Double-Edged Sport, turning as though he felt his duty had been fairly performed.

The guard flung up his Winchester and fired, the bullet whistling in dangerous proximity to Jamison's head; but the shot was accompanied by a jeering cry and the warning words:

"Jest to give ye a fa'r sample o' how I kin bark, ef I *be* a flea-dog es ye putt it, critter," mocked the ruffian. "When ye show face the next time, I'll shoot to do more then skeer: you hear me chirp?"

CHAPTER XXIV.

MORE UGLY WORK.

At that warlike signal, Abel Garrone and his fellow-citizens showed both excitement and good faith to their principal by drawing pistols in his behalf; but Beautiful Jack seemed never more cool than just then.

"Steady, friends!" he called out, swiftly, lifting his own empty hands in one of which still fluttered that flag of truce. "No need for us to play fools because those born that way set an example. Put up your guns, and—a last word for you, sir," turning again to face the guard.

"I've got you photographed. If I find you here, or near here, when I come back to resume full possession, I'll leave you so that your own mother wouldn't recognize her pet cub!"

"An' I'll be right thar while you're a-comin', durn ye!"

But Beautiful Jack had said his say, and paying the ruffian no farther notice, moved leisurely away, accompanied by his trio of witnesses.

None of the little company spoke until they passed beyond fair view of yonder stockaded mine-entrance; but then Abel Garrone parted lips to utter:

"Well, pardner, what comes next?"

"War to the knife, and the knife to the hilt!"

The Double-Edged Sport spoke in his natural tones, but had he raved and ranted as many another man might have done under like circumstances, he could never have more powerfully impressed his witnesses.

They felt that he meant every word he uttered, and fully realized just how much those words covered.

Somehow none of the party seemed to care about talk, just then, and no questions were asked when Jack diverged from the most direct route for Paradise Park, veering around until it seemed evident he had the Crimmins cabin in view as his next destination.

For nearly a half hour, then, the quartette proceeded in comparative silence, which was broken at length by the Double-Edged Sport himself.

"Mr. Garrone is aware of the fact, and I reckon it's barely possible that you gentlemen may have guessed as much," was his beginning, pretty much as though his tongue was continuing what his brain had been turning over in silence. "And that is this: I've already enlisted a little army to back me up in any attempt I may make toward retaking possession of the property Daddy Baker left behind him."

"And I can go bail that the little army has enlisted for the war, friends," declared Garrone, eagerly enough. "I know, for I enlisted the majority of them by my lonesome!"

"Leaving us out, is it?" asked Major McCann, sharply.

"Because we knew we could safely count on both of you gentlemen standing up for the right," quickly cut in Beautiful Jack, with a frank smile and ready grip for each. "Others might require argument and pay in advance, but *you*—"

Even more eloquent was that blank, and those slightly ruffled feathers were smoothed instant.

For his part, Abel Garrone went on to name those enlisted, among whom were some of the best citizens Paradise Park could boast.

"With you two gentlemen, our ranks are complete," he declared, with enthusiasm in face as in voice. "And if we saw fit to make open proclamation, publishing broadcast the reasons why we're in the right and the Forepaugh outfit entirely in the wrong, we'd have a force sufficient to not only carry that mine, but to sweep over the whole country!"

If Jack could not entirely endorse this enthusiastic statement, he was equally decided in what did pass his lips.

"The whole world shall soon know what I know now; that Forepaugh and

Eakins are trying to hold by armed force what neither one of them has a ghost of a right to claim. And that is why I add—this!

"No matter what it costs in money, time, risk, or even bloodshed, I'm going to recapture that mine! I've taken every amicable step, so far. I have offered every chance for the claim-jumpers to reconsider and pull out of the nasty hole they've jumped into. Now—it's solid business from this hour on!"

"I've got force sufficient to sweep away all opposition, but even though I was forced to play a lone hand in this game, I'd never falter. I'm in it to win, and if blood flows, let the full blame rest where it by right belongs!"

"That's white! Any man who'd ask more would grumble at being hanged!" declared Garrone.

After this fashion that walk was enlivened, and almost ere they knew it, the quartette came out in plain view of the Crimmins' shack on the hillside.

Those black eyes caught a keen glow and sparkle as the Man from Gypsum looked ahead—for what?

If in hopes of catching speedy sight of Mrs. Dingle, he was doomed to disappointment, for all was still about the cabin, and the place actually seemed deserted of all human life.

Of course that could not be, and Beautiful Jack choked back the sharp hail which involuntarily started from his lungs. 'Twould be a foolish exhibition, and might expose—what?

"Looks as though everybody's gone off visiting," declared Garrone, evidently struck by that same odd fancy. "Wonder if—hello!"

From other lips came kindred ejaculations, for one and all caught sight of a human figure lying near the cabin, asleep or—dead?

With a scarcely articulate cry Beautiful Jack sprung forward at top speed, recognizing Harlow Crimmins in that motionless shape an instant later. And—another fierce cry as he saw bloodstains marking that head, now bare save for the tangled and matted locks of white hair.

"Come, men!" he cried, hoarsely. "More devils' work here! Look for—oh, Fanny! Mrs. Dingle! Where are you?"

His voice rung forth in a half-roar, so intense was his excitement just then; but while the hill and its many rocks re-echoed his call, never another answer came back.

He dashed into the cabin, to find it empty, with all in wild confusion as though the place had been hastily yet thoroughly ransacked for plunder or other things still more desirable.

He sprung through the cabin, emerging at the rear, to repeat those fiercely longing shouts; but still with only the leaping echoes to make reply.

Neither Fanny nor Willie Dingle were to be found, living or dead!

Meanwhile the other men had given poor Crimmins their attention, at first thinking him dead and past all saving.

They saw that he had been shot at least once, while his head was cut and bruised as though he had been most brutally hammered into subjection.

But life still lingered in that tough shell, and after a plentiful use of water, the old hunter gave a husky groan and essayed to rise up.

By this time the Double-Edged Detective was convinced that neither mother nor child was anywhere in that vicinity, and hoping to glean some definite information from the lips of the old man, he joined the trio already caring for the injured mountaineer.

Almost savagely Jamison questioned the poor fellow, gripping an arm and even shaking him to call back those wandering wits.

For now Harlow Crimmins was able to sit up, and to talk in thick and curiously clumsy tones; but he seemed wholly incapable of comprehending what was said to him, or of making any intelligible speech.

Giving over that vain effort for the moment, Beautiful Jack scribbled a few words upon a leaf in his notebook, tearing it out and handing it to Remire Croffut, hurriedly speaking:

"Will you hasten with this to town, at once, friend? Give it to Dan Horrigan: you know him, of course?"

"Like a book. What next?" curtly asked the elected messenger, clearly willing to perform whatever duty might be assigned him.

"Tell him what has happened here. Tell him to fetch his men this way without loss of a moment more than he finds absolutely necessary. You will do this, Croffut?"

"You bet I will! And if there's any fighting to follow it all up count me in for my full share, will you?"

"Gladly. Go, now, and good-luck go with you!"

"I'm leaving mighty little of it behind me, anyway!" grimly commented the messenger, tightening his belt another hole, then moving away at a brisk trot.

Beautiful Jack turned again to Harlow Crimmins, but found precious scant consolation in that quarter.

By this time the injured hunter had undergone a fairly thorough examination. Only one gunshot wound was found, and that in itself would hardly prove fatal with even ordinary care; but the poor old fellow was terribly battered about the head.

So far as could be told by sense of touch, the skull was not fractured, yet all could tell that the brain was badly affected, and none dared predict what would be the ultimate result.

Urging his friends to continue the questioning as far as they deemed safe, Beautiful Jack turned away in hopes of solving the mystery through finding a possible clew in or about the cabin.

Here and there he passed, fiercely eager to hit off a trail, sternly determined to avenge in full this foul treatment of his recently gained friends; but all his efforts were in vain.

The marauders had left no positive clew, no identifying sign behind them, while the ground about the cabin was so well-beaten down that his keenest scrutiny failed to meet with reward.

And so, baffled in all other directions, Jack returned to where poor Harlow Crimmins was being cared for, now seemingly able to both hear and to speak, yet still incapable of comprehension or scrutiny failed to meet with reward.

Again and again did the fiercely interested Sport beg the old man to give more light: to help them in avenging both his own wrongs, and, what was still more important, to save or avenge his missing daughter.

That name—Fanny—seemed to steady the poor old man the most, and Beautiful Jack worked that chord to the utmost. And then—

"Devil—Doc—he'll kill my—my baby girl!"

"He did it all: Ralph Eakins!" fiercely cried the Man from Gypsum.

CHAPTER XXV.

LAST CALL AND FAIR WARNING.

Already Jack had in his mind connected that man with the outrage, and it needed but this broken muttering to fully convince himself that his earliest suspicions had been founded upon fact.

Neither Garrone nor Major McCann could at first give credence to such an idea, knowing the doctor as long and as intimately as they had.

"Surely there's some mistake!"

"A mistake which shall prove a fatal one to Ralph Eakins: I swear that much by all the powers of heaven and of hell!" fiercely cried the Double-Edged Sport, right hand rising and diagonal scar glowing like a streak of blood across his unusually pale face.

"Devil!" huskily mumbled the injured hunter, rising to his feet and starting off as though bent on giving chase to those villains who had ravished his home.

"I couldn't—why was he—don't! Kill me, but—my little girl is—stop, Doc!"

Amazed at the degree of bodily strength thus displayed by one whom they had only a few minutes past believed seriously if not fatally injured, Garrone and McCann caught hold of and restrained the mountaineer, fearing lest he work himself fresh harm while thus irresponsible.

Smothering his savage passions and impatience as best he might, knowing that he could do little good until after the going and coming of his messenger to Paradise Park, Beautiful Jack set himself to soothing and nursing the veteran of the hills, even now hoping to extract from him more definite information regarding this outrage and its prime authors.

Bit by bit he contrived to patch out the truth; little by little his two witnesses grew convinced that Dr. Eakins had in honest fact been mixed up in that vile deed, and that the physician must be a thousand-fold worse man than either had ever given him credit for.

It all came in a broken, disconnected way, giving no accurate details, making no positive charges. Although exhibiting a marvelous degree of strength of body for one so injured, otherwise poor Crimmins seemed lamentably weak.

He could hear, and seemed to comprehend what was said to him. His eyes and wistful expression told that much. But when he essayed reply, speech failed him almost entirely.

He struggled to give expression to his thoughts, only to fail. At the very best, but broken sentences and half-coherent words found vent.

Still, during that necessary waiting for aid to reach them, Jack had ample time in which to labor, and, as stated before, that patchwork ended in convincing all present that Dr. Eakins had a hand in this foul outrage, even if it had not come to pass wholly through his commands.

"The dirty scoundrel!" fiercely cried Jamison, now wholly unlike the cool, jaunty, careless Sport he had seemed of late. "I know what he was playing after: the will and the deeds left behind by Reese Baker!"

"But he surely must have known that—"

"Look at poor Crimmins, will you?" with an impatient outflinging of a hand. "How many men of his age could ever have rallied from such brutal treatment? Dollars to cents that Eakins left him for dead! And—I swear by all mankind holds sacred! to run that infernal villain down and fully avenge the wrongs of this man and his—"

That strong voice choked, and Beautiful Jack could not audibly complete the oath which was being registered within his heart.

To think of Fanny Dingle helpless in the grip of such an infernal scoundrel!

And so the afternoon slowly wore away, the Man from Gypsum fairly eating his heart out with the delay which could not be helped. Alone, or with but these two comrades to back him up, what could he do against an enemy so wholly unscrupulous as Ralph Eakins had shown himself?

Not for a single instant now did John Jamison doubt that man of medicine being the arch-enemy. Imperfect though the evidence was, his instinct told him 'twas surely the truth.

The day was nearly spent before aught was seen or heard of messenger or mission; but then Jack gave a low, fiercely eager cry as he caught sight of human beings just coming into view over yonder gentle rise in the rocky ground.

"At last! Now, please heaven, we'll buckle down to solid business once more!" he added, as he hurried forward to meet the coming men.

Faithful Remire Croffut was at their head, with big Dan Horrigan bearing him company. And close upon their heels came an even score of thoroughly armed men, one and all of whom seemed ready and willing to earn wages through frolic

or fight, with, perchance, a bit of prejudice in favor of the last-named amusement.

First giving one and all a hearty greeting, Beautiful Jack briefly explained the emergency, declaring that Dr. Ralph Eakins had led the evil gang, and surely had been prime mover in it all.

"It's plain enough just why, gentlemen," continued the Double-Edged Sport, deeming it wisest to make all things clear before pressing ahead.

"Hugh Forepaugh claimed ownership of the mining claim owned and worked by Reese Baker before his assassination, but I now have good reasons to believe he was but a cat's-paw for Eakins.

"Before dying, Daddy Baker made a will to further secure his property and foil his murderers. He likewise gave Mrs. Dingle and her father the deeds and patent to his claim, over yonder. Now—

"Dr. Eakins has committed this devilish outrage mainly for the purpose of securing or destroying those very papers! Look how he has abused poor Crimmins! And think what—try to imagine the sort of usage which that poor woman will receive at his hands unless—"

"We'll set her free!" cried Abel Garrone, sternly, eyes all aglow. "Lead us on, Jamison! We'll free the woman and hang her captor!"

"Amen!" fervently spoke the Double-Edged Detective, doffing hat for a moment, then taking more positive action.

He curtly warned his little army that the move now opening might easily end in bloodshed, bidding all who shrunk from that to withdraw before going further.

He paused for an answer, but no man fell back. One and all were ready to advance, let the consequence be what it might.

Harlow Crimmins had betrayed slight interest in gathering or in the talk which followed, but now, as the little army made a move in the direction of yonder mine, he started in company, and refused to stay behind. Fanny needed him. Little Willie was calling for grandpa. He must go, and so—

"You look after him, Thompson," directed Jack, picking out one of his most reliable men. "Fetch the poor old fellow along if he bears up all right. If not, stay with him, and you'll be no loser for missing any of the fun: I promise you that much."

With his mind relieved on that score, the Man from Gypsum led his force onward, heading as directly as the lay of ground would admit for the stockaded entrance to the Reese Baker mine.

There was little talk by the way. One and all knew that the claim was to be taken, and all knew, too, that fighting hard and fast would almost surely come before victory was won.

"All the same, we'll get there with both feet!" confidently predicted Abel Garrone. "We've got the right end of the poker, and if any fingers get scorched—'twon't be *our* breath which has to do the cooling off: no, *sir*!"

Night had fairly set in before the little army could cover the stretch, but if Beautiful Jack counted on taking the enemy by surprise, or recapturing the jumped claim with a single rush, he was quickly undeceived.

"Keerful, thar!" came a harsh challenge ere they could cross what had, the day before, been indicated as the deadline. "Come any furdur an' we'll blow ye higher'n a kite!"

"Keep your shirt on, old man," called back Beautiful Jack, apparently himself once more. "It's talk comes first. If not, you'd never have heard until you felt us—redhot, too!"

"You, is it, Johnny Chin-chin?"

"Even I, flea-dog."

"I'll dog you ef—"

"You shall have the chance to do all that, too, unless you're wiser than either words or actions have indicated up to date," coolly retorted the representative from Gypsum. "But first, where's your boss?"

"Not in your old socks, anyway, blame ye."

"Where is Dr. Ralph Eakins, then, since you're standing on your dig, old fellow? Ask him to come to the front for a moment, will you?"

"I'll ax you to rack out o' this, with the toe o' my cowhides, ef ye cain't take a hint an' scatter 'ithout sech. Git, durn ye! We hain't no manner o' use fer sech truck. Git, afore I waste good ammynition on sech measley game! Git, fer the last time o' saying so!"

"All right, stranger: we'll go, for just two hours by the watch," clearly spoke the Double-Edged Sport, casting aside all air of jesting and of mockery. "This is my last, fair warning, so take heed.

"I have kept strictly inside the law from start to finish. I have given you law-breakers more than fair and ample warning to vacate. But there's a limit to any one man's patience, and you've overridden mine."

"Will you rack out, cuss ye?"

"After finishing my say-so, yes. And that ultimatum is just this.

"I grant you just two hours by the watch to vacate these premises. At the end of that period of grace, I'll come and take my own. And, if I am offered resistance in even the slightest degree—"

"You'll git it in the neck ef you don't rack out, ye blame fool!"

"—the blame rest upon the scoundrel who advised you to jump this claim," coldly persisted the Double-Edged Sport. "For my men will crush all opposition, and kill every rascal they catch with arms in hand and fighting for the cowardly cur, Ralph Eakins—"

So far the Sport spoke, voice growing sterner, fiercer, but then a red glare of light lit up the narrow opening in that stockade, and with the loud explosion, a bullet whizzed past uncomfortably nigh his ear.

"Climb out o' that, durn an' double-durn ye!" savagely cried the guard. "That's *my* fair warnin', blast ye all!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE DOUBLE-EDGED SPORT GETTING HERE.

Jack ducked low and swiftly sprung to one side as that shot came, for he believed it was aimed at his life.

Still he retained all of his nerve and coolness, instantly crying out in warning to his little army:

"Don't shoot, friends! Hold hard, all!"

None too soon that call, either, for his men, enraged by such a foul action, were already lifting guns for a volley, and preparing for a hot rush which would have brought matters to a crisis instant.

"Don't shoot, I say!" added the Sport, sharply, as he came their way. "I've promised a truce of just two hours, and we'll play white even if we are dealing with curs and cowards!"

"Augh! you make me want to go snooze!" mocked the fellow who had so far acted as representative and spokesman for the claim-jumpers. "I hed you lined, an' could bark a squirrel at double the distance. Ef I'd wanted, you'd be 'thout a ruff to your fool brain this holy minnit."

"And I warn you—"

"Go soak your head!" derisively interrupted the guard. "That's jest a sample chunk o' what you'll ketch in dead loads ef you ever dast to show up in these yer diggings ary mo'. Now—you git!"

"For two hours, remember," coldly retorted Beautiful Jack. "When that period of grace has expired—look out, for we're coming!"

"All right. We'll see to yer gwine back. Yer own legs won't be able fer to tote ye: an' that's no lie, neither!"

Jack made a sign which bade his men follow him, moving off through the night as though he meant to abandon that attempt to regain the Reese Baker mine.

So a few of his men more than half believed, but they were quickly undeceived.

Halting when at what he deemed a safe

distance from the enemy, the Double-Edged Sport motioned for the men to gather about him, then spoke in low but distinct tones.

"You heard what I told that fellow, gentlemen. I meant each and every word of it, too."

"Then—we're going to take the place?"

"Of course. That ought to go without my saying. And now, to make all hands understand just what lies in front, and just how I propose to work the little joker at as slight cost to our side as may be, I want just five good men, leaving out Abel Garrone—"

"What's the matter with Abel Garrone?" demanded that worthy.

"He's all right. And if I don't pick him as one of my pards, it's because I save a still more responsible position for him," quickly explained the commander of this expedition.

"That's one on me: we'll drink it off when we strike town," frankly admitted Honest Abel.

"May we all be there to celebrate! But—business, all!"

"Five good men will bear me company. The remainder will wait over here, blockading yonder adit, permitting no man to enter, although any who see fit to go outside may pass your lines, always excepting Ralph Eakins.

"If he should show up, coming from either way, take him and hold him! Aliye if you can without too great risk to yourselves, but take him—living or dead!"

"You bet we will if we get the chance," declared Garrone.

"It'll be worth an extra thousand dollars to you, if you catch him. Now—listen, please.

"You'll keep this end of the line until the two hours have expired, or you hear from us again. Unless to take Eakins, don't begin a row until you *do* hear from us, whether inside of or after the grace goes out. Understand?"

"Yes, only—"

"All right. You'll easily know when we want you to take action, unless you keep both ears plugged up. Until then—wait and watch!"

Abel Garrone and the men he was left to command might easily have wished for more definite instructions, but apparently Beautiful Jack felt that he had said sufficient for all purposes.

With brief scrutiny he told off five men to bear him company on his secret mission, then turned away before further questions could be fairly put into shape.

Blindly though they were acting, not one of that quintette deemed it best to ask any questions, for the time being, at least.

Jack no doubt knew well enough what he was doing, and, somehow, bold fellows though they were, one and all, neither cared to set up an inquisition of their own, even where their own lives were so vitally interested.

For a few minutes the Double-Edged Sport seemed striking out for Paradise Park itself, but then he abruptly changed his course, now heading directly toward the Reese Baker cabin on the hillside.

Not a word was spoken until they came within eye-range of the shack, then the Double-Edged Sport called a halt, for the first time giving his picked crew an intimation of his plans.

"I'm going up yonder, to foolish Mr. Perkins if I can. I want tin. I'm going to have it, too; if not smoothly, then roughly. You fellows can lie low while I trick my man, or come with a rush if I have to use actual force instead. Understand?"

They did, and feeling confident that he might rely upon their backing if needed, Jack moved silently yet boldly forward.

Of course he had no means of knowing just how large a force had been stationed at this point, although he fancied it could not be strong in numbers, since here was little to defend there. Unless—but he would not give that "if" a thought until obliged to do so.

Jack reached the shack unchallenged,

and gently tried the door, though hardly hoping to find it unsecured. Nor was it. And at his touch, however guarded, a stir and bustle came from within, closely followed by the harsh voice of Dick Perkins.

"Who's thar? Git, durn ye! Git, or I'll—who is it, I say?"

"Eakins," replied Jamison, with a wonderful imitation of the doctor's voice. "Open up and let me in, Perkins. There's trouble brewing and—open door, I say!"

A far wiser than that sleek guardian might well have fallen into that same mistake, but Dick Perkins quickly realized how vast a one he had committed by obeying those subdued yet imperious commands.

With sure grip and resistless might Beautiful Jack leaped upon the ruffian, gripping throat and shutting off more than a husky cry of angry terror as he bore his game heavily to the puncheon floor.

At the same instant he gave a call which brought his picked men in swift haste, for he knew not how many comrades Perkins might have to aid in defending the mountain shack.

Not one, as events proved, for the muscular rascal was subdued and bound hand and foot, without shot or blow being given in his defense.

Then, striking a light and making sure no other enemies were about, Jack lifted a trap-door which opened over a rude cellar dug from beneath the cabin, motioning his men to follow as he dropped down into the excavation.

Closing the door overhead and leaving Perkins past working harm, bound and gagged securely, the Double-Edged Sport sprung a fresh surprise upon his allies, kicking away some dirt and revealing another door to which was attached a strong loop of rawhide. Grasping this, he lifted the door, showing the mouth of what seemed to be a contracted tunnel which led to—what and whither?

The Double-Edged Sport laughed briefly at those looks and words of amazement, then drily spoke:

"As the son of Reese Baker, is it so mighty strange that I should know his secrets, gentlemen? And *this* one is—a mighty convenient way of getting in at the back door, where the front entrance is so closely and jealously guarded, don't you think?"

"And it does—we're going—"

"In the Reese Baker mine, to take full possession, yes," curtly supplied the Double-Edged Sport, as he dropped into the hole, then added: "Follow, please, and the one who comes last had better lower the cover. I hardly think any of the Eakins outfit even suspects such an entrance as this, but we're not here to throw away any chances, remember."

For some little distance Jack had to crouch, almost crawl, as he led the way through that contracted tunnel; but then a barrier of seemingly solid stone barred their further progress, and a halt was called by the leader.

"We're mighty nigh getting there with all feet, pards," Beautiful Jack announced, twisting head that his words might the better reach all ears behind. "And now, take heed: wait for me to give the word, to strike the first blow, to fire the first shot."

"I firmly believe that we'll find Ralph Eakins in yonder, head and front of the claim-jumpers. And more: I sacredly believe that he carried off Mrs. Dingle and her child, as security for the deeds and patent to this very mine!"

"If he did all that—"

"Leave him to me, please. I'll see that he pays all debts, never you fear. But what I wanted to say most, is just this:

"Our first duty as white men is owing to the prisoners, if my guess comes true. We've got to keep them from harm, no matter what else has to go undone. And so I repeat: wait for me to give the cue, before you take action. Then—go in for all you're worth, and make every shot and stroke count: understand?"

There could be but one answer, and when that was given, Jack turned toward that stone barrier, doing something there in the dark, but just what that something was his present comrades could only guess.

Enough that the stone slowly yielded to the steady pressure which Jamison put forth, moving as upon a pivot, letting a dim light come to them through the opening thus formed.

Quickly slipping through, Beautiful Jack was followed by his men, finding themselves in an irregularly-shaped but fairly spacious cavern.

None too soon, either! For, just then, there came the sharp cry which told a woman was in peril or already suffering torture!

CHAPTER XXVII.

A VILLAIN UNDISGUISED.

When Jack asked the guard to summon his master, Ralph Eakins, to step to the front, the man of medicine was within easy ear-shot, standing in fact but a few feet to the rear of that rough-tongued representative of the claim-jumpers.

It was not wholly physical cowardice that kept the doctor from making his presence known. To do him justice there was precious little craven blood contained in those veins, and had he thought the game advised such a course, the Double-Edged Sport would have had his desires granted in right short order.

As it was, Eakins really kept the guard for making his shot count for more than a bit of warning: and the time was to come when he might well curse his folly in so doing, too!

When Jack gave his final warning, and with it due notice that at the expiration of two more hours, he would return to take by main force what diplomacy had failed to win him, Eakins laughed in scorn to his henchmen, assuring them that they had naught to fear.

"You are acting strictly within your rights. This is the property of Hugh Forepaugh, and I am acting as his representative now that he is disabled. The law is on our side, and if those blowhards really venture an assault, shoot straight and shoot to kill!"

After this Dr. Eakins drew nearer the adit, looking and listening.

There was almost total quiet reigning without, yet it did not take long to be assured that the mine was in a state of siege.

For a little while the doctor was powerfully tempted to take a step which would surely bring matters to a focus if indeed the Double-Edged Sport and his present backers really meant business as threatened.

But then prudence won, and he drew back, to again address his men.

"Some of the curs are skulking outside, yonder, although I hardly believe they will be crazy enough to actually start a row where every point of law and right lies flatly against them."

"If they do, the result lies at their door. We shall simply defend our own, and no matter how much blood may flow, not one iota of blame can turn our way."

"Ef you say so, boss."

"I do say so. I am ready to make my oath to that effect if you wish," promptly declared the doctor. "Just wait and watch, making no move toward breaking the peace yourselves, but ever in readiness to defend your trust against one and all such law-breakers."

"I can depend on you for this, gentlemen?"

"You bet your sweet life, Doc!"

"An' that's no lie, neither!"

As one man the rugged fellows enlisted by the claim-jumpers made reply to that same effect. So long as they had his assurance that the law was with instead of against them, the "tough-nuts" were ready to fight from start to finish.

Giving further instructions to call him at the first sign of actual trouble from

the enemy, Dr. Eakins turned away from that adit, slowly moving deeper into that curious combination of nature and man's handiwork, head bowed as though in deep reflection.

And so he was, to tell the truth.

For months past that dangerous game had been studied and efforts made to guard each and every point of peril.

Their first move had been to fully assure themselves that the mine found and in a measure developed by Reese Baker, was really valuable enough to merit such a bold play.

While doing this, the two conspirators had been surprised by the owner of the mine, and knowing that 'twas do now or fare worse, they at once opened fire, with the totally unlooked for result which has already been described.

That was the first weak, imperfect move made in the game, and led up to all which had followed: the drifting of poor Reese Baker through the underground tunnel, his discovery and rescue, his ultimate murder while lying helpless beneath the hands which were supposed to save rather than to destroy!

And then—all the rest of it!

Well might Hugh Forepaugh declare that Beautiful Jack was a hoodoo, for naught save trouble upon trouble, balk after balk, had come their way since the Man from Gypsum first stepped into the game.

Ralph Eakins made a fierce gesture and muttered a vicious curse as all this (with much more) flashed through his restless brain.

"Only for him the old curse would have died in the river, yonder! Only for him there'd have been no will-making, no talk of deeds and disputing our claims which—oh, devil roast him over a slow fire!"

"If he hadn't chipped in so mighty brash, I wouldn't have had to take such a step as this last one. And—if the whole truth should leak out when—bah!" with another swift gesture. "That old fool is too cold to skin, long ere this! And—the pretty-faced fool who has made so much trouble—I'll settle her hash, right now!"

As though all doubts were cast aside for the time being, Dr. Eakins quickened his steps, hurrying along that dimly lighted cavern toward a fairly bright fire of cut wood, near the spot where Hugh Forepaugh and himself had been surprised by the return of Reese Baker.

Here he found two captives, Fanny Dingle and her son, Willie.

Both shrank perceptibly from his approach, but Eakins was past taking notice of such comparative trifles, now, and without preface he spoke to the woman who held in arms her frightened child.

"I don't know whether you've seen and heard enough to make it out or not, Fanny Dingle, but the facts run like this: There's an armed mob coming out here to take possession of this mine, unless we can stand 'em off one way or another."

"Now, you're no fool. You've seen enough of life to know that two and two makes four when added together. And so I tell you this: join my interests to yours, and we'll be able to hold out against all the world, else. Will you do it?"

"I don't—you have no right to—"

"I'll make it right, don't you worry," was the impatient interruption as Eakins drew yet a little closer, speaking on in swift words: "What better can you do, Fanny? I hold a regular bill of sale to all this property, and the law will uphold me in any steps I take to defend my legal rights."

"Still, you hold a will in your favor. You have—or at least can tell where to lay hands upon them—the original papers which Baker ought to have turned over to us: which he swore to do, and doubtless would have done only for his—mishap."

"Now, putting your claims with my legal rights, and we can defy all the world beside! So—will you do it?"

"No," declared Fanny, with a sudden

burst of courage and energy. "I saw you brutally beat—and shoot my—poor old—oh, you demon!"

With a swift bend and motion, Dr. Eakins placed hand across those quivering lips for an instant, then drawing back a bit as Fanny was silenced, he spoke on in still more vicious tones:

"I warned you against acting the fool, woman; I say it again. You're wholly in my power. No one outside of this mine can even give a guess as to where you are, or what fate may have befallen you. So—don't force me to treat you even more harshly than I have, so far.

"Say that you will join forces with me. I swear on my part to treat you fairly. I agree to marry you, even, if—"

"You? I'd rather die a thousand deaths!" passionately cried Fanny Dingle, shrinking away, yet with eyes fairly blazing with indignant scorn for this, her arch-enemy.

"Careful, my proud beauty," warned Dr. Eakins, showing his teeth briefly. "There's far worse than marriage may betide you, and then—have you forgotten that you are not alone in captivity?"

"I don't—my little Willie!"

"Are you beginning to see something of the ugly truth, my lady? I tell you, frankly, that we're liable to be attacked by a powerful force, led by that scoundrel with a scarred face: fugitive from the gallows, beyond a doubt!"

"And without you agree to join cause with me from start to finish, I'll put you and the kid in the front rank, to serve as bullet-shields!"

"No, no, you monster!"

"Yes, yes, you little fool!" mocked Eakins, snatching Willie from her arms in spite of her wild scream of mingled rage and terror.

CHAPTER XXVIII. IN A DEATH GRAPPLE.

This was the cry which so startled Jack Jamison and sent him forward in a mad rush, forgetful of prudence, of his instructions to men, of everything save this: almost certainly Fanny Dingle was in sore distress.

Fortunately for the Double-Edged Sport, the claim-jumpers had no idea of danger coming from any channel save that of the regular entrance where stockade and rifles would make defense comparatively easy even against a far superior force.

Hence, there were none to block that fierce rush, and none to down the Man from Gypsum while he was giving thought to and seeing none save that woman in distress.

For, by the red glow of the wood-fire Jack caught sight of struggling shapes, one of which surely wore feminine drapery, and which was—

"Let up, you devil!"

Dr. Eakins was holding the screaming child aloft in one hand, his other beating back and foiling the frantic efforts at rescue made by Mrs. Dingle. Fanny was screaming as she fought; the doctor was cursing viciously as he beat the mother back.

And this was what John Jamison saw.

"Let up, you devil!" he thundered, words hardly recognizable so intense was his rage.

He gripped a revolver, but he dared not try a shot lest his lead harm innocent instead of guilty; and dropping the weapon rather than lose even the fraction of an instant in replacing it, he leaped straight for the murderer of Reese Baker with open hands.

Only for that fierce cry from the Sport, Ralph Eakins might have fallen a comparatively easy victim to his own vicious passions, for child and mother were keeping him pretty busy; but hearing that cry, and seeing that herculean shape winding toward himself, he dropped Willie, flung off the mother, and jerked forth a revolver.

The hammer rose and fell even as the gun came forth, but Jack Jamison was already upon him, and Eakins hardly knew whether his shot had taken effect.

One swift stroke knocked the pistol from his grasp, that arm almost paralyzed for the moment, then Jack Jamison closed with him, arms threatening to crush in ribs or dislocate spine as the enemies wrestled savagely for the mastery.

Only for that attempt to end all ere it could fairly begin, by a snap-shot, Ralph Eakins might have fared better, might have given the Man from Gypsum a harder fight for the first fall; but as it was he fought as only one thoroughly desperate can ever fight, and the two men went reeling, staggering here and there, fiercely panting, hotly growling, more like a couple of wild beasts in a close death-grapple than aught purely human.

Willie shrieked in terror, his mother cried aloud in mingled fright and anxiety for their friend: for, swift as had been that rush and grapple, she recognized her champion, and knew that he had come to her rescue.

None the less excited, and but little more cool for the moment were the picked five who had accompanied the Double-Edged Detective on this forlorn hope; and while they followed their leader in that uncertain light they were at a loss to pick friend from enemy, and before they could fairly decide how best to act, the end came!

Reeling here and staggering there, fighting more like wild beasts than human beings, the rivals for the dead man's mine tripped and fell—upon the very edge of that chasm down which poor Reese Baker had been hurled, to ultimately meet his death at the hands of Ralph Eakins.

A wild scream from Fanny's lips—cries of fierce warning from the picked five—then the two men toppled over, falling down to what seemed certain death, still locked in each other's arms.

All this, coming so suddenly, filled the gold-cavern with echoes which fairly electrified the claim-jumpers at the front adit, for they instinctively realized that trouble was breaking, even while they had not the ghost of an idea how that could be, for Dr. Eakins had repeatedly assured them that there was but that single entrance to guard.

Hearing screams of women, curses and shouts of men, echoes of at least one shot which those irregular walls multiplied ten-fold, the armed guard turned that way, coming with a rush, nearly every man forgetting that they had an enemy to fear without, as well.

And so the picked five saw their leader fall into that chasm, from the unknown depths of which up-floated sullen sounds as of moving waters, and back from whence came one wild scream of—was it merely of terror, or did it mean death to him whose lips shaped the sounds?

Then the claim-jumpers came with their rush, and knowing that scant mercy would be shown them now, the picked five flung up their guns and opened fire, working hammer and trigger with wondrous celerity, and in spite of that dim and uncertain light, making more pellets than one count against the startled, half-cowed mass over yonder.

Here and there a man dropped, dead or crippled, the last working far more injury to their side than those who were put out of the fight instantly, for their cries and curses of pain served to still further demoralize the claim-jumpers.

Then, hearing the sounds from within the cave, and naturally taking them for the signal which Jack Jamison proposed to give in due course of time, the little army under command of Abel Garrone, Major McCann and Big Dan Horrigan, gripped guns and came with a rush, making very little noise until they were fairly at the narrow opening left in that stockade, but making ample amends for all when they plunged through, Honest Abel still in the lead, finding no opposition to their progress even when they reached the adit itself.

Once inside the gold-cavern loud cheers

burst from their lips, partly to let their friends know they were closing in, partly because animal spirits had to find vent in crazy yells and shouts and whoopings.

And so, taken front and rear, knowing not how strong a force opposed them, yet certain that they were fairly surrounded and taken at a terrible disadvantage, lacking a leader in addition, the claim-jumpers broke and fled with yells of terror and howls for quarter.

They had fired a few shots when opened upon by the picked five, but that had been more through instinct than any concerted action, most of their bullets flying wide of the mark, and not one actually claiming a life.

Abel Garrone was as fiercely worked up as any member of his own party, yet he was a cool-brain, and, withal, a humane man.

He came there determined to fight for what he believed was the right, no matter what odds they might find barring the way.

His trigger-finger itched as sharply as that of the next man, but when he saw how thoroughly the claim-jumpers were demoralized, and how they dropped weapons as they blindly fled to find safety, for the most part crying aloud for mercy, all warlike fury fled, and humanity alone remained to guide his words and action.

"Hold, everybody!" he cried, at the top of his voice, striking down or aside such weapons as he could reach on the instant. "They've given up, and to kill any more would be foulest murder! Stop, I say! Spare every man who throws down his weapons and throws up his hands!"

Quick to take the cue were both Major McCann and Dan Horrigan, the two worthies adding their loud commands to the voice of Abel Garrone.

The result was no longer in doubt. The claim-jumpers were only too glad to accept the privilege of surrender, and those few who had still clung to their weapons now cast them aside and joined in the cry for quarter.

"Line 'em up, boys!" further commanded Garrone, naturally taking the lead since Jack Jamison failed to do so. "See that they're disarmed and fixed so that they can't—what's that?"

It was the frightened cry of a child, coming from across yonder, near the hole in that stone flooring. And, as the logs fell apart, making the blaze leap up higher and clearer, Honest Abel caught sight of Mrs. Dingle and her child, kneeling beside that chasm.

"What is it?" cried Garrone, dropping command and hurrying that way. "Surely these devils haven't—what's the matter, Mrs. Dingle?"

Fanny lifted her head, tears marking her pale and haggard face. A half-dazed stare at the speaker, then she motioned to the abyss, saying:

"Dead—down there—Jack!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

AT THE ROPE'S END.

With a degree of emotion which could hardly have been added to if the missing one had been a brother by birth, Abel Garrone bent dangerously far over that split in the rock flooring, listening for cry or sound which might in part at least reassure him; then he shouted aloud the name of the Double-Edged Sport, louder and more prolonged as naught save hollow echoes came back by way of answer.

From below came the low, sullen murmur of stirring waters, and while neither Garrone nor any of his present companions knew aught concerning that freak of nature, even the most sanguine among them could hardly doubt the doom which had befallen their chieftain.

Hardly knowing what she did or how much she was betraying in her agitation, Fanny Dingle begged the men to save their leader, urging them on to greater efforts when no instant action was taken.

And yet, what remained for them to do?

Surely John Jamison if still alive and within hearing of their voices would have made known that fact ere this.

Again and again Abel Garrone shouted down that ugly mass of darkness. Again and still again those gathered perilously nigh that irregular opening listened with stilled breath—listened for the answer which never came back to their strained ears.

Abel Garrone turned away in grim despair, feeling fairly heartsick himself as he caught sight of that pale, pained face.

He shook his head like one who was forced to abandon all hope, and with a shiver as though biting cold had found her very heart, Fanny Dingle shrunk away, bowing face upon the curly head of her frightened child.

Then, still accompanied by his faithful guardian, Harlow Crimmins came up, giving a glad cry of recognition as little Willie fairly screamed with joy at sight of his "gran pa!"

That meeting did more for the old mountaineer than aught else, and as the trio drew a little apart from the rest, one could see that his dazed brain was fairly rallying, and that in due course of time the old man would be himself again.

There was a vast deal for Abel Garrone and his fellow-commanders to do, even after the battle was won and the claim-jumpers had surrendered to the right.

Thus it came to pass that no particular effort was made to search for either friend or foe down that cavern chasm, until it was too late for any such move to be made.

For, just when the prisoners were fairly secured and placed beyond chance or opportunity for making further mischief, a tall, athletic figure came from the regular entrance, calling forth cheerily:

"Hello, pardners! What sort o' luck, anyway?"

"Superficial Abraham!" fairly exploded Abel Garrone, staring like one wholly unable to believe his own senses. "Jack Jamison! But—confound it all, man, you're—you're dead!"

"Am I? Well, now, old fellow, if this is the grip of a corpse—what's the matter with you, anyway?"

Garrone writhed and squirmed with pain under that tremendous grip, but the tears which involuntarily came to his eyes surely were not entirely born of sorrow or of physical pain.

Fanny Dingle caught that voice, saw that shape, and then a low, broken cry escaped her lips as she realized that this last and heaviest blow of all had been spared her—that, instead of dying while essaying to be of service to herself and child, this stranger had survived both death-grapple and fall into yonder ugly chasm.

John Jamison heard and saw, and dropping that half-crushed hand without stopping to say aught further, he sprung across to where the little family group was in waiting. And then—well, very few words were uttered, but eyes met eyes, hand pressed hand, and if hearts were not throbbing in perfect unison, that was a matter of nature and through no fault of owners.

A few brief moments of such indulgence, then Jack (like one following an impulse too strong for resistance) bowed head low enough to drop a hot kiss upon a trembling hand, turning away with almost fierce eagerness to cry aloud:

"Time enough to explain it all later on, gentlemen. For now—I want rope and a light of some sort. You can get the first from among the horses, outside. Make haste, please!"

Half a dozen willing messengers jumped away to oblige, while others were equally busy in procuring light for service.

Neither feat was difficult, since the halters or trail ropes belonging to the horses ridden by the little army could supply one want, while the claim-jumpers, as a matter of course, had provided themselves with a sufficient number of lanterns.

While these preparations were being

made, John Jamison curtly explained his vanishment and his reappearance when all others had given him up for dead; and when all was told, the solution proved simple enough.

The water which muttered so sullenly down that chasm was in reality an eccentric curve in the little river itself.

That fact was past all further doubt, since Jack (just as poor Reese Baker had been served before him) was swept through the eddying pool of blackness, carried through an underground channel to be cast forth on the surface of the river only a few score yards below the gold-cavern.

Through it all he had retained his senses, although a terrible shock had separated him from his antagonist in the earliest moments of their fall in that death-grapple.

"I looked for him, later on," grimly explained the leader, as he knotted together ropes for what was yet to come. "I knew he couldn't have floated past without my knowledge, unless sunk near the bottom."

"And so I'm going to find what's left of Ralph Eakins—find him if living, find his corpse if death has cheated the hangman!"

Cold and stern, showing not one faint ray of pity or of regret for that treacherous enemy, Jack Jamison made this vow; and flinging the free end of the rope toward his friends, he slipped foot into the strong loop he had formed at the other extremity, then sunk to his knees on the verge of the chasm.

A low, involuntary cry came from Fanny's lips, and she hid her face in the lap of her father, whose arms closed around her in loving clasp, his husky voice soothing his child as best he knew how.

If the Double-Edged Sport saw or heard he made no sign. Just now he held but one thing in view; to find and secure all that might remain of Dr. Ralph Eakins.

Little by little the rope was paid out, the edges of that chasm being lined with eager heads and faces, one and all peering downward as the lantern which Jack had swung around his neck cast yellow rays upon wall and waters.

To behold nothing more! Surely the arch-conspirator had vanished forever from mortal ken!

But Jack Jamison was not so readily discouraged, and though neither jagged rock nor slowly circling eddy of inky waters revealed his prey, alive or dead, he went down into the water, floating along until fairly hidden from sight of his comrades above, entering the low-roofed tunnel which may have taken untold ages for that river to eat out and shape like this. And then—

All of a sudden the strain slackened upon that rope, and cries of dismay burst from those whose strong hands were guiding the work from the gold-cavern:

What had happened? Had the Double-Edged Sport lost his hold, to be swept away by those treacherous waters? Had something given way, just when the most depended upon all remaining true? Had—

A hollow-sounding voice made itself heard, coming as though out of the very bowels of the earth.

Words could not be distinguished with certainty, but when Abel Garrone ventured to pull cautiously upon that rope, resistance was felt. A moment later the rope itself was violently shaken, and, obeying the signal, those sturdy fellows began a hard fight with the sullen waters which seemed rarely loth to surrender its ghastly prey.

For such it proved to be when, a few minutes later, a grewsome object was raised out of the depths; the corpse of Ralph Eakins, face horribly marred and skull fairly shattered through striking upon a ragged point of rock when falling into the chasm in that death-grapple!

"Look after him, then lower rope for me," was ordered from below.

CHAPTER XXX.

HOW THE DEAL PANNED OUT.

The dawning of a new day found matters both quiet and peaceful at the gold-cavern.

The claim-jumpers had been thoroughly demoralized, a few of them killed during those first fierce moments when the picked five so gallantly withstood rush of four-fold their own number of thoroughly armed men, more of them wounded, all of them disarmed and cowed into meek submission.

After all, the tools themselves were not so much to blame for what had taken place, and lacking leaders the privates were merely read a stern lecture which contained a fair warning against further meddling in such matters, then bidden go and sin no more.

The wounded were cared for as best might be, while the dead were decently disposed of until better arrangements might be made for their final disposal.

All save Ralph Eakins.

Director Jack had his men pass in single file past the mutilated corpse, each one lingering long enough to fully satisfy himself as to the identity of the dead man.

This was not so difficult, in spite of that marred face and horribly shattered skull. The hair, the size, the shape, the general appearance proved a great help to identification; then, when the prisoners were brought forward, not one among them all but could identify the dead.

Those who might have felt doubts if face alone was taken into consideration recognized Dr. Eakins by his garments, his ornaments.

After more than an hour had been spent after this fashion, the dead was declared dead, and Ralph Eakins was so registered for all time.

A clear and impartial statement of the actual facts was drawn up and witnessed by men from both sides of that contest. This was sent by special messenger to Paradise Park, with an earnest request that a meeting be called, a committee be formed with full power to act and to investigate, then to make their conclusions known to all the world.

Meanwhile Harlow Crimmins had regained his scattered wits, now that his daughter and his grandchild were found living and without especial harm; and leaving matters there at the gold-cavern in charge of Abel Garrone, Jack Jamison, with a small escort, conveyed the little family back to their mountain shack, there to take the food and repose they so sadly needed.

Never mind just what passed between Fanny Dingle and the Man from Gypsum during that walk, or the few minutes spent in company near that murmuring spring-brook. What affair of ours, pray?

Enough that they parted the best of friends, and that there was no prospect for another contest over the property left behind him by poor Reese Baker.

While Abel Garrone was left in charge at the gold-cavern, Big Dan Horrigan had been sent to Paradise Park to report what had taken place, and Major McCann, the third of that influential trio, had been elected as one of the little party to escort Fanny and her relatives back to her mountain home.

This seemed a rather unjust discrimination, but if the gallant major felt that way, he never showed as much; and the now happy Jack made all realize that, after all, theirs was fully as important a duty as any other, "if not more so."

"I want you gentlemen to go to town with me," he said, after parting for the present with the little family. "And as we go along, I'll give you a few pointers which may prove of interest to you, as fair and honest citizens."

And the Double-Edged Detective proved to be fully as good as his word, too!

Although as yet he had nothing more definite than shrewd instinct and careful reasoning to back up his belief, he firmly held that Dr. Ralph Eakins and Hugh Forepaugh were accountable for the murder of poor Reese Baker.

"Now that Eakins is dead, our only chance for learning the whole truth lies in Forepaugh. He knows, and what he knows he has got to tell, no matter how badly it may weigh against himself. And I want you gentlemen to bear me company as witnesses to everything."

That was readily agreed to, for, since what had already taken place, including the efforts made by Dr. Eakins to unite his claims with those of Mrs. Dingle, one and all began to believe that the Double-Edged Sport really had hold of the correct clew to that ugly affair.

And thus it ultimately proved.

Hugh Forepaugh was greatly broken down in nerve by his severe injuries, and when he was told how Ralph Eakins had come to his end over yonder in the gold-cavern, he broke down entirely.

Bit by bit, yet as rapidly as his physical and mental condition would permit, the gambler told of that desperate game for a fortune. He made solemn oath that Dr. Eakins first proposed the deal, and led him on and on until—that bitter black day!

He told how they had entered the gold-cavern to examine it more thoroughly, in order to make sure the stake was worth the risk, and told how they were surprised by Reese Baker in the act. And—the rest!

Then, after rallying a little in strength, Hugh Forepaugh confessed how Dr. Eakins had tried to cover their nefarious work by a far more diabolical deed—how he brutally assassinated the poor man whom he had been brought to save!

Not until the citizen committee had met and delivered their judgment, wholly clearing the party who had retaken the gold-cavern mine, did the Man from Gypsum fairly and fully reveal the "deal" he had made in the Reese Baker affair.

It took a long time to make everything clear, and many words to satisfy and gratify all curiosity, but the substance will now suffice.

Jack was John Jamison, one-time bosom-friend and business partner of John Baker, the "my Jacky, boy!" of the murdered hermit miner.

Through that comrade Jamison learned of the hermit father, his valuable mine, the secret tunnel, and all else which came into play later on.

John Baker died, after short fever, leaving as his share of the partnership some twenty-odd thousand dollars, bequeathing this to his father, together with forgiveness, even as he begged to be forgiven.

Jamison was coming to break the sad news to Reese Baker when he saw Willie Dingle, found Fanny Dingle risking life to rescue the badly injured miner. And then—the rest naturally followed.

"If I lied in claiming to be Jack Baker, 'twas not to make money for myself, but to do as poor Daddy Baker wished; to cheat the devils and—serve an angel!" declared the Double-Edged Sport.

He did both, as only a man of his caliber could.

Dr. Ralph Eakins was buried in an unmarked grave after having been fully identified by at least two-thirds of Paradise Park. Unlike poor Daddy Baker, no prayer, no service, no sweetly sad hymn was heard above his dishonored remains. Buried, and remembered only to be loathed!

Hugh Forepaugh recovered, but not until after his left arm was amputated above the elbow. That loss, with the crippling of his cunning right hand, was deemed sufficient punishment for even his crimes, and as time rolled on, he vanished from Paradise Park and from memory as well.

Abel Garrone, Big Dan Horrigan, Major McCann, and, in fact, all who served the Double-Edged Detective in those stirring times were suitably rewarded. The majority with ample coin, the trio with lucrative positions in the "Gold-cavern Mine," which John Jamison and Com-

pany fairly developed and worked "for all that was in it."

The "Company?"

She who was formerly Fanny Dingle, of course!

As the man with a scar frequently declared, in public as in private, the little woman surely deserved something rich for taking such a miracle of ugliness for a mate!

And yet—

"You are Beautiful Jack to me; then, now, forever, my love!"

THE END.

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